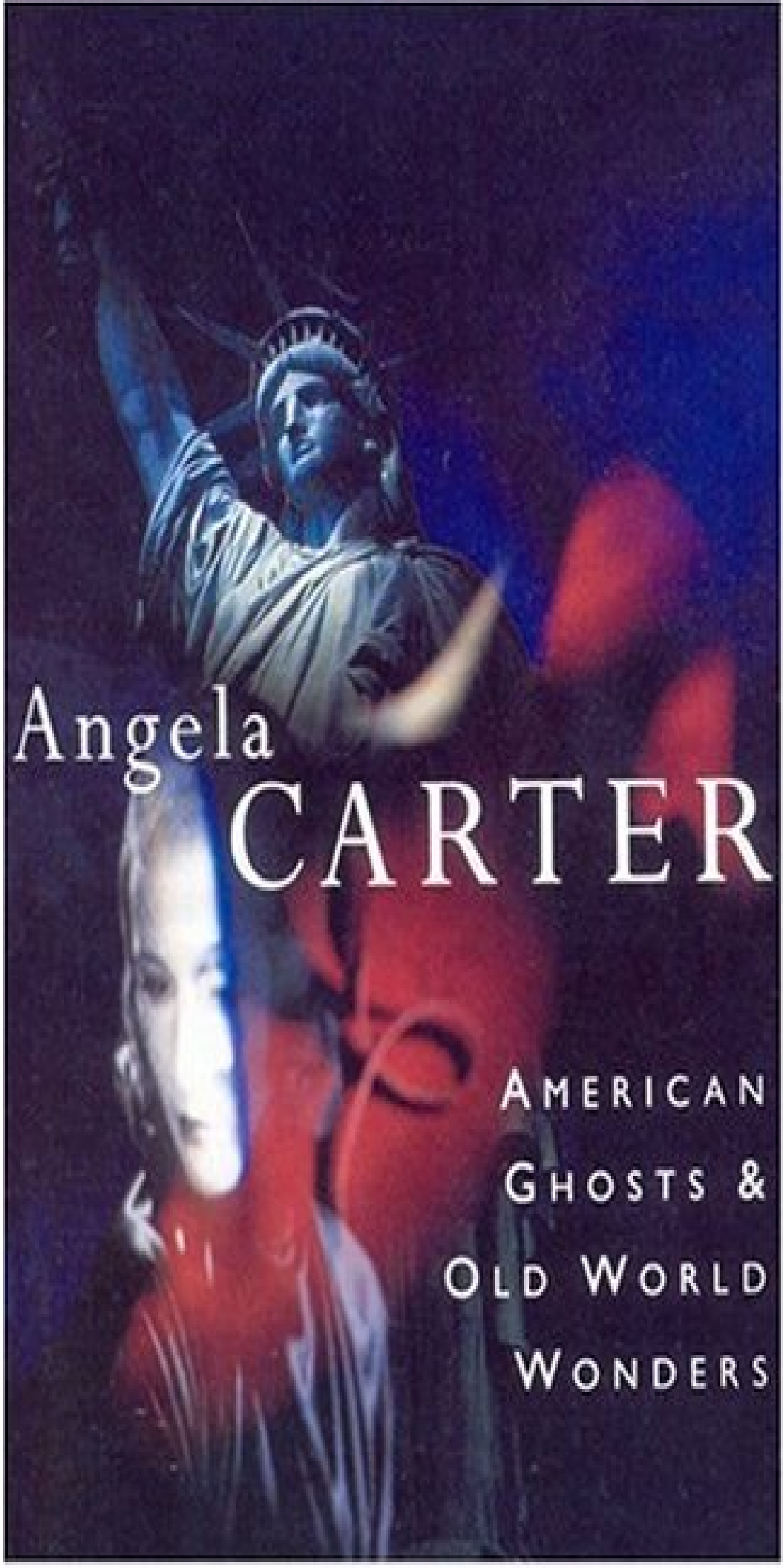
Angela
CARTER
AMERICAN
GHOSTS &
OLD WORLD
WONDERS

American Ghosts and Old World Wonders

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Lizzie's Tiger

When the circus came to town and Lizzie saw the tiger, they were living on Ferry Street, in a very poor way. It was the time of the greatest parsimony in their father's house; everyone knows the first hundred thousand is the most difficult and the dollar bills were breeding slowly, slowly, even if he practised a little touch of usury on the side to prick his cash in the direction of greater productivity. In another ten years' time, the War between the States would provide rich pickings for the coffin-makers, but, back then, back in the Fifties, well -- if he had been a praying man, he would have gone down on his knees for a little outbreak of summer cholera or a touch, just a touch, of typhoid. To his chagrin, there had been nobody to bill when he had buried his wife.

For, at that time, the girls were just freshly orphaned. Emma was thirteen, Lizzie four -- stern and square, a squat rectangle of a child. Emma parted Lizzie's hair in the middle, stretched it back over each side of her bulging forehead and braided it tight. Emma dressed her, undressed her, scrubbed her night and morning with a damp flannel, and humped the great lump of little girl around in her arms whenever Lizzie would let her, although Lizzie was not a demonstrative child and did not show affection easily, except to the head of the house, and then only when she wanted something. She knew where the power was and, intuitively feminine in spite of her gruff appearance, she knew how to court it.

That cottage on Ferry -- very well, it was a slum; but the undertaker lived on unconcerned among the stiff furnishings of his defunct marriage. His bits and pieces would be admired today if they turned up freshly beeswaxed in an antique store, but in those days they were plain old-fashioned, and time would only make them more so in that dreary interior, the tiny house he never mended, eroding clapboard and diseased paint, mildew on the dark wallpaper with a brown pattern like brains, the ominous crimson border round the top of the walls, the sisters sleeping in one room in one thrifty bed.

On Ferry, in the worst part of town, among the dark-skinned Portuguese fresh off the boat with their earrings, flashing teeth and

incomprehensible speech, come over the ocean to work the mills whose newly erected chimneys closed in every perspective; every year more chimneys, more smoke, more newcomers, and the peremptory shriek of the whistle that summoned to labour as bells had once summoned to prayer.

The hovel on Ferry stood, or, rather, leaned at a bibulous angle on a narrow street cut across at an oblique angle by another narrow street, all the old wooden homes like an upset cookie jar of broken gingerbread houses lurching this way and that way, and the shutters hanging off their hinges and windows stuffed with old newspapers, and the snagged picket fence and raised voices in unknown tongues and howling of dogs who, since puppyhood, had known of the world only the circumference of their chain. Outside the parlour window were nothing but rows of counterfeit houses that sometimes used to scream.

Such was the anxious architecture of the two girls' early childhood.

A hand came in the night and stuck a poster, showing the head of a tiger, on to a picket fence. As soon as Lizzie saw the poster, she wanted to go to the circus, but Emma had no money, not a cent. The thirteen-year-old was keeping house at that time, the last skivvy just quit with bad words on both sides. Every morning, Father would compute the day's expenses, hand Emma just so much, no more. He was angry when he saw the poster on the fence; he thought the circus should have paid him rental for the use. He came home in the evening, sweet with embalming fluid, saw the poster, purpled with fury, ripped it off, tore it up.

Then it was supper-time. Emma was no great shakes at cookery and Father, dismissing the possibility of another costly skivvy until such time as plague struck, already pondered the cost-efficiency of remarriage; when Emma served up her hunks of cod, translucently uncooked within, her warmed-over coffee and a dank loaf of baker's bread, it almost put him in a courting mood, but that is not to say his meal improved his temper. So that, when his youngest climbed kitten-like upon his knee and, lisping, twining her tiny fingers in his gunmetal watch-chain, begged small change for the circus, he answered her with words of unusual harshness, for he truly loved this last daughter, whose obduracy recalled his own.

Emma unhandily darned a sock.

"Get that child to bed before I lose my temper!"

Emma dropped the sock and scooped up Lizzie, whose mouth set in dour lines of affront as she was borne off. The square-jawed scrap, deposited on the rustling straw mattress -- oat straw, softest and cheapest -- sat where she had been dropped and stared at the dust in a sunbeam. She seethed with resentment. It was moist midsummer, only six o'clock and still bright day outside.

She had a whim of iron, this one. She swung her feet on to the stool upon which the girls climbed down out of bed, thence to the floor. The kitchen door stood open for air behind the screen door. From the parlour came the low murmur of Emma's voice as she read *The Providence Journal* aloud to Father.

Next-door's lean and famished hound launched itself at the fence in a frenzy of yapping that concealed the creak of Lizzie's boots on the back porch. Unobserved, she was off -- off and away! -- trotting down Ferry Street, her cheeks pink with self-reliance and intent. She would not be denied. The circus! The word tinkled in her head with a red sound, as if it might signify a profane church.

"That's a tiger," Emma had told her as, hand in hand, they inspected the poster on their fence.

"A tiger is a big cat," Emma added instructively.

How big a cat?

A *very* big cat.

A dumpy, red-striped, regular cat of the small, domestic variety greeted Lizzie with a raucous mew from atop a gatepost as she stumped determinedly along Ferry Street; our cat, Ginger, whom Emma, in a small ecstasy of sentimental whimsy presaging that of her latter protracted spinsterhood, would sometimes call Miss Ginger, or even Miss Ginger Cuddles. Lizzie, however, sternly ignored Miss Ginger Cuddles. Miss Ginger Cuddles sneaked. The cat put out a paw as Lizzie brushed past, as if seeking to detain her, as if to suggest she took second thoughts as to her escapade, but, for all the apparent decision with which Lizzie put one firm foot before the other, she had not the least idea where the circus might be and would not have got there at all without the help of a gaggle of ragged Irish children from Corkey Row, who happened by in the company of a lean, black and tan, barking dog of unforeseen breed that had *this* much in common with Miss Ginger Cuddles, it could go wither it pleased.

This free-ranging dog with its easy-going grin took a fancy to Lizzie and, yapping with glee, danced around the little figure in the white pinafore as it marched along. Lizzie reached out to pat its head. She was a fearless girl.

The child-gang saw her pet their dog and took a fancy to her for the same reason as crows settle on one particular tree. Their wild smiles circled round her. "Going to the circus, are ye? See the clown and the ladies dancing?" Lizzie knew nothing about clowns and dancers, but she nodded, and one boy took hold of one hand, another of the other, so they raced her off between them. They soon saw her little legs could not keep up their pace, so the ten-year-old put her up on his shoulders where she rode like a lord. Soon they came to a field on the edge of town.

"See the big top?" There was a red and white striped tent of scarcely imaginable proportions, into which you could have popped the entire house on Ferry, and the yard too, with enough room to spare inside for another house, and another -- a vast red and white striped tent, with ripping naphtha flares outside and, besides this, all manner of other tents, booths and stalls, dotted about the field, but most of all she was impressed by the great number of people, for it seemed to her that the whole town must be out tonight, yet, when they looked closely at the throng, nowhere at all was anyone who looked like she did, or her father did, or Emma; nowhere that old New England lantern jaw, those ice-blue eyes.

She was a stranger among these strangers, for all here were those the mills had brought to town, the ones with different faces. The plump, pink-cheeked Lancashire mill-hands, with brave red neckerchiefs; the sombre features of the Canucks imbibing fun with characteristic gloom; and the white smiles of the Portuguese, who knew how to enjoy themselves, laughter tripping off their tipsy-sounding tongues.

"Here y'are!" announced her random companions as they dumped her down and, feeling they had amply done their duty by their self-imposed charge, they capered off among the throng, planning, perhaps, to slither under the canvas and so enjoy the shows for free, or even to pick a pocket or two to complete the treat, who knows?

Above the field, the sky now acquired the melting tones of the end of the day, the plush, smoky sunsets unique to these unprecedented industrial cities, sunsets never seen in this world before the Age of Steam that set the mills in motion that made us all modern.

At sunset, the incomparably grave and massive light of New England acquires a monumental, a Roman sensuality; under this sternly voluptuous sky, Lizzie abandoned herself to the unpremeditated smells and never-before-heard noises -- hot fat in a vat of frying doughnuts; horse-dung; boiling sugar; frying onions; popping corn; freshly churned earth; vomit; sweat; cries of vendors; crack of rifles from the range; singsong of the white-faced clown, who clattered a banjo, while a woman in pink fleshings danced upon a little stage. Too much for Lizzie to take in at once, too much for Lizzie to take in at all -- too rich a feast for her senses, so that she was taken a little beyond herself and felt her head spinning, a vertigo, a sense of profound strangeness overcoming her.

All unnoticeably small as she was, she was taken up by the crowd and tossed about among insensitive shoes and petticoats, too close to the ground to see much else for long; she imbibed the frenetic bustle of the midway through her nose, her ears, her skin that twitched, prickled, heated up with excitement so that she began to colour up in the way she had, her cheeks marked with red, like the marbling on the insides of the family Bible. She found herself swept by the tide of the crowd to a long table where hard cider was sold from a barrel.

The white tablecloth was wet and sticky with spillage and gave forth a dizzy, sweet, metallic odour. An old woman filled tin mugs at the barrel spigot, mug after mug, and threw coins on to other coins into a tin box -- splash, chink, clang. Lizzie clung on to the edge of the table to prevent herself being carried away again. Splash, chink, clang. Trade was brisk, so the old woman never turned the spigot off and cider cascaded on to the ground on the other side of the table.

The devil got into Lizzie, then. She ducked down and sneaked in under the edge of the tablecloth, to hide in the resonant darkness and crouch on the crushed grass in fresh mud, as she held out her unobserved hands under the discontinuous stream from the spigot until she collected two hollowed palmfuls, which she licked up, and smacked her lips. Filled, licked, smacked again. She was so preoccupied with her delicious thievery that she jumped half out of her skin when she felt a living, quivering thing thrust into her neck in that very sensitive spot where her braids divided. Something moist and intimate shoved inquisitively at the nape of her neck.

She craned round and came face to face with a melancholy piglet, decently dressed in a slightly soiled ruff. She courtepusly filled her palms

with cider and offered it to her new acquaintance, who sucked it up eagerly. She squirmed to feel the wet quiver of the pig's curious lips against her hands. It drank, tossed its pink snout, and trotted off out the back way from the table.

Lizzie did not hesitate. She followed the piglet past the dried-cod smell of the cider-seller's skirts. The piglet's tail disappeared beneath a cart piled with fresh barrels that was pulled up behind the stall. Lizzie pursued the engaging piglet to find herself suddenly out in the open again, but this time in an abrupt margin of pitch black and silence. She had slipped out of the circus grounds through a hole in their periphery, and the dark had formed into a huge clot, the night; whilst Lizzie was underneath the table; behind her were the lights, but here only shadowy undergrowth, stirring, and then the call of a night bird.

The pig paused to rootle the earth, but when Lizzie reached out to stroke it, it shook its ears out of its eyes and took off at a great pace into the countryside. However, her attention was immediately diverted from this disappointment by the sight of a man who stood with his back to the lights, leaning slightly forward. The cider-barrel-spigot sound repeated itself. Fumbling with the front of his trousers, he turned round and tripped over Lizzie, because he was a little unsteady on his feet and she was scarcely to be seen among the shadows. He bent down and took hold of her shoulders.

"Small child," he said, and belched a puff of acridity into her face. Lurching a little, he squatted right down in front of her, so they were on the same level. It was so dark that she could see of his face only the hint of moustache above the pale half-moon of his smile.

"Small girl," he corrected himself, after a closer look. He did not speak like ordinary folks. He was not from around these parts. He belched again, and again tugged at his trousers. He took firm hold of her right hand and brought it tenderly up between his squatting thighs.

"Small girl, do you know what *this* is for?"

She felt buttons; serge; something hairy; something moist and moving. She didn't mind it. He kept his hand on hers and made her rub him for a minute or two. He hissed between his teeth: "Kissy, kissy from Missy?"

She *did* mind that and shook an obdurate head; she did not like her father's hard, dry, imperative kisses, and endured them only for the sake of

power. Sometimes Emma touched her cheek lightly with unparted lips. Lizzie would allow no more. The man sighed when she shook her head, took her hand away from the crotch, softly folded it up on its fingers and gave her hand ceremoniously back to her.

"Gratuity," he said, felt in his pocket and nipped her a nickel. Then he straightened up and walked away. Lizzie put the coin in her pinafore pocket and, after a moment's thought, stumped off after the funny man along the still, secret edges of the field, curious as to what he might do next.

But now surprises were going on all round her in the bushes, mewings, squeaks, rustlings, although the funny man paid no attention to them, not even when a stately fat woman rose up under his feet, huge as a moon and stark but for her stays, but for black cotton stockings held up by garters with silk rosettes on them, but for a majestic hat of black leghorn with feathers. The woman addressed the drunken man angrily, in a language with a good many ks in it, but he ploughed on indifferently and Lizzie scuttled unseen after, casting an inquisitive backward glance. She had never seen a woman's naked breasts since she could remember, and this pair of melons jiggled entrancingly as the fat woman shook her fist in the wake of the funny man before she parted her thighs with a wet smack and sank down on her knees again in the grass in which something unseen moaned.

Then a person scarcely as tall as Lizzie herself, dressed up like a little drummer-boy, somersaulted -- head over heels -- directly across their paths, muttering to himself as he did so. Lizzie had just the time to see that, although he was small, he was not shaped quite right, for his head seemed to have been pressed into his shoulders with some violence, but then he was gone.

Don't think any of this frightened her. She was not the kind of child that frightens easily.

Then they were at the back of a tent, not the big, striped tent, but another, smaller tent, where the funny man fumbled with the flap much as he had fumbled with his trousers. A bright mauve, ammoniac reek pulsed out from this tent; it was lit up inside like a Chinese lantern and glowed. At last he managed to unfasten and went inside. He did not so much as attempt to close up after him; he seemed to be in as great a hurry as the

tumbling dwarf, so she slipped through too, but as soon as she was inside, she lost him, because there were so many other people there.

Feet of customers had worn all the grass from the ground and it had been replaced by sawdust, which soon stuck all over the mudpie Lizzie had become. The tent was lined with cages on wheels, but she could not see high enough to see what was inside them, yet, mixed with the everyday chatter around her, she heard strange cries that did not come from human throats, so she knew she was on the right track.

She saw what could be seen: a young couple, arm in arm, he whispering in her ear, she giggling; a group of three grinning, gaping youths, poking sticks within the bars; a family that went down in steps of size, a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, a boy, a girl, a boy, a girl, down to a baby of indeterminate sex in the woman's arms. There were many more present, but these were the people she took account of.

The gagging stench was worse than a summer privy and a savage hullabaloo went on all the time, a roaring as if the sea had teeth.

She eeled her way past skirts and trousers and scratched, bare legs of summer boys until she was standing beside the biggest brother of the staircase family at the front of the crowd, but still she could not see the tiger, even if she stood on tiptoe, she saw only wheels and the red and gold base of the cage, whereon was depicted a woman without any clothes, much like the one in the grass outside only without the hat and stockings, and some foliage, with a gilded moon and stars. The brother of the staircase family was much older than she, perhaps twelve, and clearly of the lower class, but clean and respectable-looking, although the entire family possessed that pale, peculiar look characteristic of the mill operatives. The brother looked down and saw a small child in a filthy pinafore peering and straining upwards.

" *Veux-tu voir le grand chat, ma petite?"*

Lizzie did not understand what he said, but she knew what he was saying and nodded assent. Mother looked over the head of the good baby in the lace bonnet as her son heaved Lizzie up in his arms for a good look.

"Les poux. . ." she warned, but her son paid her no heed.

"Voilà, ma petite!"

The tiger walked up and down, up and down; it walked up and down like Satan walking about the world and it burned. It burned so brightly, she was scorched. Its tail, thick as her father's forearm, twitched

back and forth at the tip. The quick, loping stride of the caged tiger; its eyes like yellow coins of a foreign currency; its round, innocent, toy-like ears; the stiff whiskers sticking out with an artificial look; the red mouth from which the bright noise came. It walked up and down on straw strewn with bloody bones.

The tiger kept its head down; questing hither and thither though in quest of what might not be told. All its motion was slung from the marvellous haunches it held so high you could have rolled a marble down its back, if it would have let you, and the marble would have run down an oblique angle until it rolled over the domed forehead on to the floor. In its hind legs the tense muscles keened and sang. It was a miracle of dynamic suspension. It reached one end of the cage in a few paces and whirled around upon itself in one liquid motion; nothing could be quicker or more beautiful than its walk. It was all raw, vivid, exasperated nerves. Upon its pelt it bore the imprint of the bars behind which it lived.

The young lad who kept hold of her clung tight as she lunged forward towards the beast, but he could not stop her clutching the bars of the cage with her little fingers and he tried but he could not dislodge them. The tiger stopped in its track halfway through its mysterious patrol and looked at her. Her pale-blue Calvinist eyes of New England encountered with a shock the flat, mineral eyes of the tiger.

It seemed to Lizzie that they exchanged this cool regard for an endless time, the tiger and herself.

Then something strange happened. The svelte beast fell to his knees. It was as if it had been subdued by the presence of this child, as if this little child of all the children in the world, might lead it towards a peaceable kingdom where it need not eat meat. But only "as if". All we could see was, it knelt. A crackle of shock ran through the tent; the tiger was acting out of character.

Its mind remained, however, a law unto itself. We did not know what it was thinking. How could we?

It stopped roaring. Instead it started to emit a rattling purr. Time somersaulted. Space diminished to the field of attractive force between the child and the tiger. All that existed in the whole world now were Lizzie and the tiger.

Then, oh! then. . . it came towards her, as if she were winding it to her on an invisible string by the exercise of pure will. I cannot tell you

how much she loved the tiger, nor how wonderful she thought it was. It was the power of her love that forced it to come to her, on its knees, like a penitent. It dragged its pale belly across the dirty straw towards the bars where the little soft creature hung by its hooked fingers. Behind it followed the serpentine length of its ceaselessly twitching tail.

There was a wrinkle in its nose and it buzzed and rumbled and they never took their eyes off one another, though neither had the least idea what the other meant.

The boy holding Lizzie got scared and pummelled her little fists, but she would not let go a grip as tight and senseless as that of the newborn.

Crack! The spell broke.

The world bounded into the ring.

A lash cracked round the tiger's carnivorous head, and a glorious hero sprang into the cage brandishing in the hand that did not hold the whip a three-legged stool. He wore fawn breeches, black boots, a bright red jacket frogged with gold, a tall hat. A dervish, he; he beckoned, crouched, pointed with the whip, menaced with the stool, leaped and twirled in a brilliant ballet of mimic ferocity, the dance of the Taming of the Tiger, to whom the tamer gave no chance to fight at all.

The great cat unpeeled its eyes off Lizzie's in a trice, rose up on its hind legs and feinted at the whip like our puss Ginger feints at a piece of paper dangled from a string. It batted at the tamer with its enormous paws, but the whip continued to confuse, irritate and torment it and, what with the shouting, the sudden, excited baying of the crowd, the dreadful confusion of the signs surrounding it, habitual custom, a lifetime's training, the tiger whimpered, laid back its ears and scampered away from the whirling man to an obscure corner of the stage, there to cower, while its flanks heaved, the picture of humiliation.

Lizzie let go of the bars and clung, mudstains and all, to her young protector for comfort. She was shaken to the roots by the attack of the trainer upon the tiger and her four-year-old roots were very near the surface.

The tamer gave his whip a final, contemptuous ripple around his adversary's whispers that made it sink its huge head on the floor. Then he placed one booted foot on the tiger's skull and cleared his throat for

speech. He was a hero. He was a tiger himself, but even more so, because he was a man.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, this incomparable tiger known as the Scourge of Bengal, and brought alive-oh to Boston from its native jungle but three short months before this present time, now, at my imperious command, offers you a perfect imitation of docility and obedience. But do not let the brute deceive you. Brute it was, and brute it remains. Not for nothing did it receive the soubriquet of Scourge for, in its native habitat, it thought nothing of consuming a dozen brown-skinned heathen for its breakfast and following up with a couple of dozen more for dinner!"

A pleasing shudder tingled through the crowd.

"This tiger," and the beast whickered ingratiatingly when he named it, "is the veritable incarnation of blood lust and fury; in a single instant, it can turn from furry quiescence into three hundred pounds, yes, three hundred pounds of death-dealing fury.

"The tiger is the cat's revenge."

Oh, Miss Ginger, Miss Ginger Cuddles, who sat mewing censoriously on the gatepost as Lizzie passed by; who would have thought you seethed with such resentment!

The man's voice dropped to a confidential whisper and Lizzie, although she was in such a state, such nerves, recognised this was the same man as the one she had met behind the cider stall, although now he exhibited such erect mastery, not a single person in the tent would have thought he had been drinking.

"What is the nature of the bond between us, between the Beast and Man? Let me tell you. It is fear. Fear! Nothing but fear. Do you know how insomnia is the plague of the tamer of cats? How all night long, every night, we pace our quarters, impossible to close our eyes for brooding on what day, what hour, what moment the fatal beast will choose to strike?

"Don't think I cannot bleed, or that they have not wounded me. Under my clothes, my body is a palimpsest of scars, scar upon scar. I heal only to be once more broken open. No skin of mine that is not scar tissue. And I am always afraid, always; all the time in the ring, in the cage, now, this moment -- this very moment, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, you see before you a man in the grip of mortal fear.

"Here and now I am in terror of my life.

"At this moment I am in this cage within a perfect death trap."

Theatrical pause.

"But," and here he knocked the tiger's nose with his whipstock, so that it howled with pain and affront, "but. . ." and Lizzie saw the secret frog he kept within his trousers shift a little, ". . . but I'm not half so scared of the big brute as it is of me!"

He showed his red maw in a laugh.

"For I bring to bear upon its killer instinct a rational man's knowledge of the power of fear. The whip, the stool, are instruments of bluff with which I create his fear in my arena. In my cage, among my cats, I have established a hierarchy of fear and among my cats you might well say I am top dog, because I know that all the time they want to kill me, that is their project, that is their intention. . . but as for them, they just don't know what I might do next. No, sir!"

As if enchanted by the notion, he laughed out loud again, but by now the tiger, perhaps incensed by the unexpected blow on the nose, rumbled out a clear and incontrovertible message of disaffection and, with a quick jerk of its sculptured head, flung the man's foot away so that, caught off-balance, he half toppled over. And then the tiger was no longer a thing of stillness, of hard edges and clear outlines, but a whizz of black and red, maw and canines, in the air. On him.

The crowd immediately bayed.

But the tamer, with enormous presence of mind, seeing as how he was drunk, and, in the circumstances, with almost uncanny physical agility, bounced backwards on his boot-heels and thrust the tool he carried in his left hand into the fierce tiger's jaws, leaving the tiger worrying, gnawing, destroying the harmless thing, as a ragged black boy quickly unlatched the cage door and out the tamer leaped, unscathed, amidst hurrahs.

Lizzie's stunned little face was now mottled all over with a curious reddish-purple, with the heat of the tent, with passion, with the sudden access of enlightenment.

To see the rest of the stupendous cat act, the audience would have had to buy another ticket for the Big Top, besides the ticket for the menagerie, for which it had already paid, so, reluctant on the whole to do that, in spite of the promise of clowns and dancing ladies, it soon got bored with watching the tiger splintering the wooden stool, and drifted off.

"Eh bien, ma petite," said her boy-nurse to her in a sweet, singsong, crooning voice. *"Tu as vu la bête! La bête du cauchemar!"*

The baby in the lace bonnet had slept peacefully through all this, but now began to stir and mumble. Its mother nudged her husband with her elbow.

"On va, Papa?"

The crooning, smiling boy brought his bright pink lips down on Lizzie's forehead for a farewell kiss. She could not bear that; she struggled furiously and shouted to be put down. With that, her cover broke and she burst out of her disguise of dirt and silence; half the remaining gawpers in the tent had kin been bleakly buried by her father, the rest owed him money. She was the most famous daughter in all Fall River.

"Well, if it ain't Andrew Borden's little girl! What are they Canucks doing with little Lizzie Borden?"

John Ford's

'Tis Pity She's a Whore

NOTE:

John Ford (1586-c.1639). English dramatist of the Jacobean period. His tragedy, *'Tis Pity She's a Wliore,* was published in 1633. "Deep in a dump John Ford alone was got/With folded arms and melancholy hat." *(Choice Drollery,* 1656.)

John Ford (1895-1973). American film-maker. Filmography includes: *Stagecoach* (1938); *My Darling Clementine* (1946); *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). "My name is John Ford. I make Westerns." *(John Ford,* Andrew Sinclair, New York 1979.)

There was a rancher had two children, a son and then a daughter. A while after that, his wife died and was buried under two sticks nailed together to make a cross because there was no time, yet, to carve a stone.

Did she die of the loneliness of the prairies? Or was it anguish that killed her, anguish, and nostalgia for the close, warm, neighbourly life she had left behind her when she came to this emptiness? Neither. She died of the pressure of that vast sky, that weighed down upon her and crushed her lungs until she could not breathe any more, as if the prairies were the bedrock of an ocean in which she drowned.

She told her boy: "Look after your sister." He, blond, solemn, little; he and Death sat with her in the room of logs her husband split to build. Death, with high cheek-bones, wore his hair in braids. His invisible presence in the cabin mocked the existence of the cabin. The round-eyed boy clutched his mother's dry hand. The girl was younger.

Then the mother lay with the prairies and all that careless sky upon her breast, and the children lived in their father's house. So they grew up. In his spare time the rancher chiselled at a rock: "Beloved wife of. . . mother of. . ." beneath the space at the top he had left for his own name.

America begins and ends in the cold and solitude. Up here, she pillows her head upon the Arctic snow. Down there, she dips her feet in the chilly waters of the South Atlantic, home of the perpetually restless

albatross. America, with her torso of a woman at the time of this story, a woman with an hour-glass waist, a waist laced so tightly it snapped in two, and we put a belt of water there. America, with your child-bearing hips and your crotch of jungle, your swelling bosom of a nursing mother and your cold head, your cold head.

Its central paradox resides in this: that the top half doesn't know what the bottom half is doing. When I say the two children of the prairie, suckled on those green breasts, were the pure children of the continent, you know at once that they were *norteamericanos,* or I would not speak of them in the English language, which was their language, the language that silences the babble of this continent's multitude of tongues.

Blond children with broad, freckled faces, the boy in dungarees and the little girl in gingham and sunbonnet. In the old play, one John Ford called them Giovanni and Annabella; the other John Ford, in the movie, might call them Johnny and Annie-Belle.

Annie-Belle will bake bread, tramp the linen clean and cook the beans and bacon; this lily of the West had not spare time enough to pause and consider the lilies of the field, who never do a hand's turn. No, sir. A woman's work is never done and she became a woman early.

The gaunt paterfamilias would drive them into town to church on Sundays with the black Bible on his knee wherein their names and dates of birth were inscribed. In the buggy, his shy, big-boned, tow-headed son in best, dark, Sunday clothes, and Annie-Belle, at thirteen, fourteen, increasingly astonished at and rendered shy by her own lonely flowering. Fifteen. How pretty she was growing! They came to pray in God's house that, like their own, was built of split logs. Annie-Belle kept her eyes down; she was a good girl. They were good children. The widower drank, sometimes, but not much. They grew up in silence, in the enormous silence of the empty land, the silence that swallowed up the Saturday-night fiddler's tune, mocked the rare laughter at weddings and christenings, echoed, a vast margin, around the sermons of the preacher.

Silence and space and an unimaginable freedom which they dare not imagine.

Since his wife died, the rancher spoke rarely. They lived far out of town. He had no time for barn-raisings and church suppers. If she had lived, everything would have been different, but he occupied his spare

moments in chiselling her gravestone. They did not celebrate Thanksgiving for he had nothing for which to give thanks. It was a hard life.

The Minister's wife made sure Annie-Belle knew a thing or two when she judged it about the time the girl's bleeding started. The Minister's wife, in a vague, pastoral way, thought about a husband for Annie-Belle, a wife for Johnny. "Out there, in that little house on the prairie, so lonesome. . . Nobody for those young folks to talk to 'cept cows, cows, cows."

What did the girl think? In summer, of the heat, and how to keep flies out of the butter; in winter, of the cold. I do not know what else she thought. Perhaps, as young girls do, she thought that a stranger would come to town and take her away to the city and so on, but, since her imagination began and ended with her experience, the farm, work, the seasons, I think she did not think so far, as if she knew already she was the object of the object of her own desire for, in the bright light of the New World, nothing is obscure. But when they were children, all they knew was they loved each other just as, surely, a brother or a sister should.

She washed her hair in a tub. She washed her long, yellow hair. She was fifteen. It was spring. She washed her hair. It was the first time that year. She sat on the porch to dry her hair, she sat in the rocking-chair which her mother selected from the Sears' Roebuck catalogue, where her father would never sit, now. She propped a bit of mirror on the porch railing. It caught the sun and flashed. She combed out her wet hair in the mirror. There seemed to be an awful lot of it, tangling up the comb. She wore only her petticoat, the men were off with the cattle, nobody to see her pale shoulders except that Johnny came back. The horse threw him, he knocked his head against the stone. Giddy, he came back to the house, leading his pony, and she was busy untangling her hair and did not see him, nor have a chance to cover herself.

"Why, Johnny, I declare --"

Imagine an orchestra behind them: the frame house, the porch, the rocking-chair endlessly rocking, like a cradle, the white petticoat with eyelet lace, her water-darkened hair hanging on her shoulders and little trickles running down between her shallow breasts, the young man leading the limping pony, and, inexhaustible as light, around them the tender land.

The "Love Theme" swells and rises. She jumps up to tend him. The jogged mirror falls.

"Seven years' bad luck --"

In the fragments of the mirror, they kneel to see their round, blond, innocent faces that, superimposed upon one another, would fit at every feature, their faces, all at once the same face, the face that never existed until now, the pure face of America.

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
(Long shot) Farmhouse.
(Close up) Petticoat falling on to porch of farmhouse.

Wisconsin, Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana . . . Oh, those enormous territories! That green vastness, in which anything is possible.

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
(Close up) Johnny and Annie-Belle kiss.
"Love Theme" up.
Dissolve.

No. It wasn't like that! Not in the least like that.

He put out his hand and touched her wet hair. He was giddy.

Annabella: Methinks you are not well.
Giovanni: Here's none but you and I. I think you love me, sister.
Annabella: Yes, you know I do.

And they thought, then, that they should kill themselves, together now, before they did it; they remembered tumbling together in infancy, how their mother laughed to see their kisses, their embraces, when they were too young to know they should not do it, yet even in their loneliness on the enormous plain they knew they must not do it. . .do what? How did they know what to do? From watching the cows with the bull, the bitch with the dog, the hen with the cock. They were country children. Turning from the mirror, each saw the other's face as if it were their own.

[Music plays.]
Giovanni: Let not this music be a dream, ye gods.

For pity's sake, I beg you!
[She kneels.]
Annabella: On my knees,
Brother, even by our mother's dust, I charge you
Do not betray me to your mirth or hate.
Love me, or kill me, brother.
[He kneels.]
Giovanni: On my knees,
Sister, even by our mother's dust, I charge you
Do not betray me to your mirth or hate.
Love me, or kill me, sister.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE PORCH. DAY
Upset water-tub, spilling over discarded petticoat.
Empty rocking-chair, rocking, rocking.

It is the boy -- or young man, rather -- who is the most mysterious to me. The eagerness with which he embraces his fate. I imagine him mute or well-nigh mute; he is the silent type, his voice creaks with disuse. He turns the soil, he breaks the wills of the beautiful horses, he milks the cows, he works the land, he toils and sweats. His work consists of the vague, undistinguished "work" of such folks in the movies. No cowboy, he, roaming the plains. Where the father took root, so has the son, in the soil that was never before broken until now.

And I imagine him with an intelligence nourished only by the black book of the father, and hence cruelly circumscribed, yet dense with allusion, seeing himself as a kind of Adam and she his unavoidable and irreplaceable Eve, the unique companion of the wilderness, although by their toil he knows they do not live in Eden and of the precise nature of the forbidden thing he remains in doubt.

For surely it cannot be this? This bliss? Who could forbid such bliss!

Was it bliss for her, too? Or was there more of love than pleasure in it? "Look after your sister." But it was she who looked after him as soon as she knew how and pleasured him in the same spirit as she fed him.

Giovanni: I am lost forever.

Lost in the green wastes, where the pioneers were lost. Death with his high cheek-bones and his braided hair helped Annie-Belle take off her clothes. She closed her eyes so that she could not see her own nakedness. Death showed her how to touch him and him her. There is more to it than farmyard ways.

INTERIOR. MINISTER'S HOUSE. DAY
Dinner-table. Minister's wife dishing portions from a pot for her husband and her son.

MINISTER'S WIFE: 'Tain't right, just ain't right, those two out there, growing up like savages, never seeing nobody.

MINISTER'S SON: She's terribly pretty, Mama.

The Minister's wife and the Minister turn to look at the young man. He blushes slowly but comprehensively.

The rancher knew nothing. He worked. He kept the iron core of grief within him rustless. He looked forward to his solitary, once-monthly drink, alone on the porch, and on those nights they took a chance and slept together in the log cabin under the patchwork quilt made in the "log cabin" pattern by their mother. Each time they lay down there together, as if she obeyed a voice that came out of the quilt telling her to put the light out, she would extinguish the candle flame between her finger-tips. All around them, the tactility of the dark.

She pondered the irreversibility of defloration. According to what the Minister's wife said, she had lost everything and was a lost girl. And yet this change did not seem to have changed her. She turned to the only one she loved, and the desolating space around them diminished to that of the soft grave their bodies dented in the long grass by the creek. When winter came, they made quick, dangerous love among the lowing beasts in the barn. The snow melted and all was green enough to blind you and there was a vinegarish smell from the rising of the sharp juices of spring. The birds came back.

A dusk bird went chink-chink-chink like a single blow on the stone xylophone of the Chinese classical orchestra.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE PORCH. DAY
Annie-Belle, in apron, comes out on homestead porch; strikes metal triangle.

ANNIE-BELLE: Dinner's ready!

INTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. NIGHT
Supper-table. Annie-Belle serves beans. None for herself.

JOHNNY: Annie-Belle, you're not eating anything tonight.

ANNIE-BELLE: Can't rightly fancy anything tonight.

The dusk bird went chink-chink-chink with the sound of a chisel on a gravestone.

He wanted to run away with her, west, further west, to Utah, to California where they could live as man and wife, but she said: "What about Father? He's lost enough already." When she said that, she put on, not his face, but that of their mother, and he knew in his bones the child inside her would part them.

The Minister's son, in his Sunday coat, came courting Annie-Belle. He is the second lead, you know in advance, from his tentative manner and mild eyes; he cannot long survive in this prairie scenario. He came courting Annie-Belle although his mother wanted him to go to college. "What will you do at college with a young wife?" said his mother. But he put away his books; he took the buggy to go out and visit her. She was hanging washing out on the line.

Sound of the wind buffeting the sheets, the very sound of loneliness.

Soranzo: Have you not the will to love?
Annabella: Not you.
Soranzo: Who, then?
Annabella: That's as the fates infer.

She lowered her head and drew her foot back and forth in the dust. Her breasts hurt, she felt queasy.

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
Johnny and Annie-Belle walking on the prairie.

ANNIE-BELLE: I think he likes me, Johnny.

Pan blue sky, with clouds. Johnny and Annie-Belle, dwarfed by the landscape, hand in hand, heads bowed. Their hands slowly part.

Now they walk with gradually increasing distance between them.

The light, the unexhausted light of North America that, filtered through celluloid, will become the light by which we see America looking at itself.

Correction: will become the light by which we see *North* America looking at itself.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE PORCH. DAY
Row of bottles on a fence.
Bang, bang, bang. Johnny shoots the bottles one by one.
Annie-Belle on porch, washing dishes in a tub. Tears run down her face.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE PORCH. DAY
Father on porch, feet up on railing, glass and bottle to hand.
Sun going down over prairies.
Bang, bang, bang.

(Father's point of view) Johnny shooting bottles off the fence.

Clink of father's bottle against glass.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY
Minister's son rides along track in long shot.
Bang, bang, bang.

Annie-Belle, clean dress, tidy hair, red eyes, comes out of house on to porch. Clink of father's bottle against glass.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY
Minister's son tethers horse. He has brushed his Sunday coat.
In his hand, a posy of flowers -- cottage roses, sweetbrier, daisies.
Annie-Belle smiles, takes posy.

ANNIE-BELLE: Oh!

Holds up pricked forefinger; blood drops on to a daisy.

MINISTER'S SON: Let me . . .

Takes her hand. Kisses the little wound.

. . . make it better.

Bang. Bang. Bang.
Clink of bottle on glass.

(Close up) Annie-Belle, smiling, breathing in the scent from her posy.

And, perhaps, had it been possible, she would have learned to love the Minister's gentle son before she married him, but, not only was it impossible, she also carried within her the child that meant she must be married quickly.

INTERIOR. CHURCH. DAY
Harmonium. Father and Johnny by the altar.
Johnny white, strained; father stoical.
Minister's wife thin-lipped, furious.
Minister's son and Annie-Belle, in simple white cotton wedding-dress, join hands.

MINISTER: Do you take this woman. . .

(Close up) Minister's son's hand slipping wedding ring on to Annie-Belle's finger.

INTERIOR. BARN. NIGHT
Fiddle and banjo old-time music.
Vigorous square dance going on; bride and groom lead.
Father at table, glass in hand.
Johnny, beside him, reaching for bottle.

Bride and groom come together at end of dance; groom kisses bride's cheek. She laughs.

(Close up) Annie-Belle looking shyly up at the Minister's son.

The dance parts them again; as Annie-Belle is handed down the row of men, she staggers and faints.

Consternation.

Minister's son and Johnny both run towards her.

Johnny lifts her up in his arms, her head on his shoulder. Eyes opening.
Minister's son reaches out for her. Johnny lets him take hold of her.

She gazes after Johnny beseechingly as he disappears among the crowd.

Silence swallowed up the music of the fiddle and the banjo; Death with his hair in braids spread out the sheets on the marriage bed.

INTERIOR. MINISTER'S HOUSE. BEDROOM. NIGHT
Annie-Belle in bed, in a white nightgown, clutching the pillow, weeping.
Minister's son, bare back, sitting on side of bed with his back to camera, head in hands.

In the morning, her new mother-in-law heard her vomiting into the chamber-pot and, in spite of her son's protests, stripped Annie-Belle and subjected her to a midwife's inspection. She judged her three months gone, or more. She dragged the girl round the room by the hair, slapped her, punched her, kicked her, but Annie-Belle would not tell the father's name, only promised, swore on the grave of her dead mother, that she would be a good girl in future. The young bridegroom was too bewildered by this turn of events to have an opinion about it; only, to his vague surprise, he knew he still loved the girl although she carried another man's child.

"Bitch! Whore!" said the Minister's wife and struck Annie-Belle a blow across the mouth that started her nose bleeding.

"Now, stop that, Mother," said the gentle son. "Can't you see she ain't well?"

The terrible day drew to its end. The mother-in-law would have thrown Annie-Bell out on the street, but the boy pleaded for her, and the Minister, praying for guidance, found himself opening the Bible at the parable of the woman taken in adultery and meditated well upon it.

"Only tell me the name of the father," her young husband said to Annie-Belle.

"Better you don't know it," she said. Then she lied: "He's gone, now; gone out west."

"Was it --?" naming one or two.

"You never knew him. He came by the ranch on his way out west."

Then she burst out crying again, and he took her in his arms.

"It will be all over town," said the mother-in-law. "That girl made a fool of you!"

She slammed the dishes on the table and would have made the girl eat out the back door, but the young husband laid her a place at table with his own hand and led her in and sat her down in spite of his mother's black looks. They bowed their heads for grace. Surely, the Minister thought,

seeing his boy cut bread for Annie-Belle and lay it on her plate, my son is a saint. He began to fear for him.

"I won't do anything unless you want," her husband said in the dark after the candle went out.

The straw with which the mattress was stuffed rustled beneath her as she turned away from him.

INTERIOR. FARMHOUSE KITCHEN. NIGHT
Johnny comes in from outside, looks at father asleep in rocking-chair.
Picks up some discarded garment of Annie-Belle's from the back of a chair, buries face in it.
Shoulders shake.
Opens cupboard, takes out bottle.
Uncorks with teeth. Drinks.
Bottle in hand, goes out on porch.

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. NIGHT
(Johnny's point of view) Moon rising over prairie: the vast, the elegiac plain. "Landscape Theme" rises.

INTERIOR. MINISTER'S SON'S ROOM. NIGHT
Annie-Belle and Minister's son in bed.
Moonlight through the curtains.
Both lie there, open-eyed. Rustle of mattress.

ANNIE-BELLE: You awake?

Minister's son moves away from her.

ANNIE-BELLE: Reckon I never properly knowed no young man before. . .

MINISTER'S SON: What about --

ANNIE-BELLE (shrugging the question off): Oh. . .

Minister's son moves towards her.

For she did not consider her brother in this new category of "young men"; he was herself. So she and her husband slept in one another's arms, that night, although they did nothing else for she was scared it might harm the baby and he was so full of pain and glory it was scarcely to be borne, it was already enough, or too much, holding her tight, in his terrible innocence.

It was not so much that she was pliant. Only, fearing the worst, it turned out that the worst had already happened; her sin found her out, or, rather, she found out she had sinned only when he offered his forgiveness, and, from her repentance, a new Annie-Belle sprang up, for whom the past did not exist.

She would have said to him: "It did not signify, my darling; I only did it with my brother, we were alone together under the vast sky that made us scared and so we clung together and what happened, happened." But she knew she must not say that, that the most natural love of all was just precisely the one she must not acknowledge. To lie down on the prairie with a passing stranger was one thing. To lie down with her father's son was another. So she kept silent. And when she looked at her husband, she saw, not herself, but someone who might, in time, grow even more precious.

The next night, in spite of the baby, they did it, and his mother wanted to murder her and refused to get the breakfast for this prostitute, but Annie-Belle served them, put on an apron, cut the ham and cooked it, then scrubbed the floor with such humility, such evidence of gratitude that the older woman kept her mouth shut, her narrow lips tight as a trap, but she kept them shut for if there was one thing she feared, it was the atrocious gentleness of her menfolk. And. So.

Johnny came to the town, hungering after her; the gates of Paradise slammed shut in his face. He haunted the backyard of the Minister's house, hid in the sweetbrier, watched the candle in their room go out and still he could not imagine it, that she might do it with another man. But. She did.

At the store, all gossip ceased when she came in; all eyes turned towards Her. The old men chewing tobacco spat brown streams when she walked past. The women's faces veiled with disapproval. She was so young, so unaccustomed to people. They talked, her husband and she; they would go, just go, out west, still further, west as far as the place where the ocean Starts again, perhaps. With his schooling, he could get some clerking job or other. She would bear her child and he would love it. Then she would bear *their* children.

"Yes," she said. "We shall do that," she said.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY
Annie-Belle drives up in trap.

Johnny comes out on porch, in shirt-sleeves, bottle in hand.
Takes her reins. But she doesn't get down from the trap.

ANNIE-BELLE: Where's Daddy?

Johnny gestures towards the prairie.

ANNIE-BELLE (not looking at Johnny): Got something to tell him.

(Close up) Johnny.

JOHNNY: Ain't you got nothing to tell me?

(Close up) Annie-Belle.

ANNIE-BELLE: Reckon I ain't.

(Close up) Johnny.

JOHNNY: Get down and visit a while, at least.

(Close up) Annie-Belle.

ANNIE-BELLE: Can't hardly spare the time.

(Close up) Johnny and Annie-Belle.

JOHNNY: Got to scurry back, get your husband's dinner, is that it?

ANNIE-BELLE: Johnny. . . why haven't you come to church since I got married, Johnny?

Johnny shrugs, turns away.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY
Annie-Belle gets down from trap, follows Johnny towards farmhouse.

ANNIE-BELLE: Oh, Johnny, you *knowed* we did wrong.

Johnny walks towards farmhouse.

ANNIE-BELLE: I count myself fortunate to have found forgiveness.

JOHNNY: What are you going to tell Daddy?

ANNIE-BELLE: I'm going out west.

Giovanni: What, chang'd so soon! hath your new sprightly lord
Found out a trick in night-games more than we
Could know in our simplicity? -- Ha! is't so?
Or does the fit come on you, to prove treacherous
To your past vows and oaths?
Annabella: Why should you jest
At my calamity.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY

JOHNNY: Out west?

Annie-Belle nods,

JOHNNY: By yourself?

Annie-Belle shakes her head.

JOHNNY: With him?

Annie-Belle nods.
Johnny puts hand on porch rail, bends forward, hiding his face.

ANNIE-BELLE: It is for the best.

She puts her hand on his shoulder. He reaches out for her. She extricates herself.
His hand, holding bottle; contents of bottle run out on grass.

ANNIE-BELLE: It was wrong, what we did.

JOHNNY: What about . . .

ANNIE-BELLE: It shouldn't ever have been made, poor little thing. You won't never see it. Forget everything. You'll find yourself a woman, you'll marry.

Johnny reaches out and clasps her roughly to him.

"No," she said; "never. No." And fought and bit and scratched: "Never! It's wrong. It's a sin." But, worse than that, she said: "I don't want to," and she meant it, she knew she must not or else her new life, that lay before her, now, with the radiant simplicity of a child's drawing of a house, would be utterly destroyed. So she got free of him and ran to the buggy

and drove back lickety-split to town, beating the pony round the head with the whip.

Accompanied by a black trunk like a coffin, the Minister and his wife drove with them to a railhead such as you have often seen on the movies -- the same telegraph office, the same water-tower, the same old man with the green eyeshade selling tickets. Autumn was coming on. Annie-Belle could no longer conceal her pregnancy, out it stuck; her mother-in-law could not speak to her directly but addressed remarks through the Minister, who compensated for his wife's contempt by showing Annie-Belle all the honour due to a repentant sinner.

She wore a yellow ribbon. Her hair was long and yellow. The repentant harlot has the surprised look of a pregnant virgin.

She is pale. The pregnancy does not go well. She vomits all morning. She bleeds a little. Her husband holds her hand tight. Her father came last night to say goodbye to her; he looks older. He does not take care of himself. That Johnny did not come set the tongues wagging; the gossip is, he refuses to set eyes on his sister in her disgrace. That seems the only thing to explain his attitude. All know he takes no interest in girls himself.

"Bless you, children," says the Minister. With that troubling air of incipient sainthood, the young husband settles his wife down on the trunk and tucks a rug round her legs for a snappy wind drives dust down the railroad track and the hills are October mauve and brown. In the distance, the train whistle blows, that haunting sound, blowing across endless distance, the sound that underlines the distance.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY
Johnny mounts horse. Slings rifle over shoulder.
Kicks horse's sides.

EXTERIOR. RAILROAD. DAY
Train whistle. Burst of smoke.
Engine pulling train across prairie.

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
Johnny galloping down track.

EXTERIOR. RAILROAD. DAY
Train wheels turning.

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
Hooves churning dust.

EXTERIOR. STATION. DAY

MINISTER'S WIFE: Now, you take care of yourself, you hear? And -- (but she can't bring herself to say it).

MINISTER: Be sure to tell us about the baby as soon as it comes.

(Close up) Annie-Belle smiling gratefully.
Train whistle.

And see them, now, as if posing for the photographer, the young man and the pregnant woman, sitting on a trunk, waiting to be transported onwards, away, elsewhere, she with the future in her belly.

EXTERIOR. STATION. DAY
Station master comes out of ticket-office.

STATION MASTER: Here she comes!

(Long shot) Engine appearing round bend.

EXTERIOR. STATION. DAY
Johnny tethers his horse.

ANNIE-BELLE: Why, Johnny, you've come to say goodbye after all!

(Close up) Johnny, racked with emotion.

JOHNNY: He shan't have you. He'll never have you. Here's where you belong, with me. Out here.

Giovanni: Thus die, and die by me, and by my hand!
Revenge is mine; honour doth love command!
Annabella: Oh, brother, by your hand!

EXTERIOR. STATION. DAY

ANNIE-BELLE: Don't shoot -- think of the baby! Don't --

MINISTER'S SON: Oh, my God --

Bang, bang, bang.

Thinking to protect his wife, the young husband threw his arms around her and so he died, by a split second, before the second bullet pierced her and both fell to the ground as the engine wheezed to a halt and passengers came tumbling off to see what Wild West antics were being played out while the parents stood and stared and did not believe, did not believe.

Seeing some life left in his sister, Johnny sank to his knees beside her and her eyes opened up and, perhaps, she saw him, for she said:

Annabella: Brother, unkind, unkind. . .

So that Death would be well satisfied, Johnny then put the barrel of the rifle into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

EXTERIOR. STATION. DAY

(Crane shot) The three bodies, the Minister comforting his wife, the passengers crowding off the train in order to look at the catastrophe.

The "Love Theme" rises over a pan of the prairie under the vast sky, the green breast of the continent, the earth, beloved, cruel, unkind.

NOTE:
The Old World John Ford made Giovanni cut out Annabella's heart and carry it on stage; the stage direction reads: *Enter Giovanni, with a heart upon his dagger.* The New World John Ford would have no means of representing this scene on celluloid, although it is irresistibly reminiscent of the ritual tortures practised by the Indians who lived here before.

Gun for the Devil

A hot, dusty, flyblown Mexican border town -- a town without hope, without grace, the end of the road for all those who've the misfortune to find themselves washing up here. The time is about the turn of the century, long after the heroic period of the West is past; and there was never anything heroic about these border raiders, this poverty-stricken half-life they lead. The Mendozas, a barbarous hierarchy of bandits, run the town, its corrupt sheriff, its bank, the telegraph -- everything. Even the priest is an appointment of theirs.

The only establishment in the town with a superficial veneer of elegance is the bar-cum-whorehouse. This is presided over by a curious, apparently ill-matched couple -- an ageing, drunken, consumptive European aristocrat and his mistress, the madame, who keeps him. She's called Roxana, a straightforward, ageing, rather raddled, unimaginative, affectionate woman.

She is the sister of Maria Mendoza, the bandit's wife -- that's how she obtained the brothel concession. Roxana and her man, the dying, despairing man they call the Count, arrived, the pair of them, out of nowhere, a few years back, penniless, in rags; they'd begged a ride in a farm cart. . . "I"ve come home, Maria, after all this time. . . there's nowhere else to go." Roxana'd had a lot of experience in the trade; with her brother-in-law's blessing, with his finance, she opened up a bar-cum-brothel and staffed it with girls who'd got good reason to lie low for a while -- not, perhaps, the best class of whore. Five of them. But they suit the customers very well; they keep Mendoza's desperadoes out of trouble, they service his visitors -- and sometimes there's a casual visitor, a stray passerby, a travelling salesman, say, or a smuggler. The brothel prospers.

And the Count, in his soiled, ruffled shirt and threadbare suits of dandified black, lends a little class to the joint; so his life has come to this, he serves to ornament his mistress's bar. A certain bitterness, a dour dignity, characterises the Count.

The Count lets visitors buy drinks for him; he is a soak, but a distinguished one, nevertheless. He keeps a margin of distance about himself -- he has his pride, still, even if he's dying. He's rumoured to have been, in his day, in the Old Country, a legendary marksman. The girls chatter among themselves. Julie, the Yankee, says she's heard that he and Roxana used to do an act in a circus. He used to shoot all her clothes off her until she was as naked as the day she was born. As the day she was born!

But hadn't he killed Roxana's lover, no, not her lover but some man she'd been sold to, some seamy story. . . wasn't it in San Francisco, on the waterfront? No, no, no -- everything happened in Austria, or Germany, or wherever it is he comes from, long before he met Roxana. He's not touched a gun since he met Roxana. He never shoots, now, even if his old-fashioned, long-barrelled rifle hangs on the wall. . . look! He was *too good* a shot; they said that only the devil himself -- it's best not to pay attention to such stories, even if Maddalena once worked in a house in San Francisco where Roxana used to work and somebody told her -- but the Count's shadow falls across the wall; they hush, even if Maddalena furtively crosses herself.

In this town, nobody asks any questions. Who would live here if they had the option to live anywhere else? Poor Teresa Mendoza, pretty as a picture, sweet sixteen, sullen, dissatisfied, she got a few ideas above her station when they sent her off to a convent to learn how to read and write. What does she need to read and write for? Not when she's condemned to live like a pig. But she's going to get married, isn't she? To a rich man? Yes, but he's a rich bandit!

In the afternoon, the slack time, Roxana and her sister sit in Roxana's boudoir with the shades down against the glaring sun, rocking on cane rocking-chairs, smoking cigars together and gently tippling tequila. Maria Mendoza is a roaring, mannish, booted and spurred bandit herself; savage, illiterate, mother of one daughter only, the beautiful Teresa. "We finally fixed it, Roxana; signed, sealed and almost delivered. . . See, here's the picture of Teresa's fiance. . . isn't he a handsome man? Eh? Eh?"

Roxana looks at the cherished photograph dubiously. Another bandit, even if a more powerful one than Mendoza himself! At least she, Roxana, has managed to get herself a man who doesn't wear spurs to bed. And Teresa hasn't even met her intended. . . "No, no!" cries Maria. "That's

not necessary. Love will come, as soon as they're married, once he gets his leg over her. . . and the babies, my Teresa's babies, my grandchildren, growing up in his enormous house, surrounded by servants bowing and scraping." But Roxana is less certain and shakes her head doubtfully. "Anyway, there's nothing Teresa can do about it," says her mother firmly; "it's all been fixed up by Mendoza, she'll be the bandit queen of the entire border. That's a lot better than living like a pig in this hole."

The Mendozas do indeed live like pigs, behind a stockade, in a filthy, gypsy-like encampment of followers and hangers-on in the grounds of what was once, before the Mendozas took it over, a rather magnificent Spanish colonial hacienda. Now Mendoza himself, Teresa's hulking brute of a father, gallops his horse down the corridors, shoots out the windowpanes in his drunkenness. Teresa, the spoiled only daughter, screams at him in fury: "We live like pigs! Like pigs!"

Problems in the brothel! The pianist has run off with the prettiest of all the girls; they're heading south to start up their own place, she reckons her husband won't chase her down as far as Acapulco. They wait for the stagecoach to take them away, sitting on barrels in the general store with their bags piled around them; the coach drops one passenger, the driver goes off to water the horses. Any work here for a piano-player? Why, what a coincidence!

He's from the north, a gringo. And a city boy, too, in a velvet coat, with such long, white fingers! He winces when he hears gunfire -- a Mendoza employee boisterously shooting at chickens in the gutter. How pale he is. . .a handsome boy, nice, refined, educated voice. Is there even the trace of a foreign accent?

Like the Count, he is startlingly alien in this primitive, semi-desert environment.

Roxana melts maternally at the sight of him; he delights the Count by playing a little Brahms on the out-of-tune, honky-tonk piano. The Count's eyes mist over; he remembers. . . The conservatoire at Vienna? Can it be possible? How extraordinary. . . so you were studying at the conservatoire at Vienna? Although Roxana's delighted with her new employee, her lip curls, she is a natural sceptic. But he's the best piano-player she's ever heard.

And, anyway, nobody really asks questions in this town, or believes any answers, for that matter. He must have his reasons for holing up in this

godforsaken place. The job's yours, Johnny; you get a little room over the porch to sleep in, with a lock on it to keep the girls out. They get bored. . . don't let them bother you.

But Johnny is in the grip of a singular passion; he is a grim and dedicated being. He ignores the girls completely.

In his bedroom, Johnny places photographs of a man and a woman -- his parents -- on the splintered pine dressing-table; pins up a poster for the San Francisco Opera House on the wall, *Der Freischütz.* He addresses the photographs. "I've found out where they live, I've tracked them to their lair. It won't be long now, Mother and Father. Not long."

Hoofbeats outside. Maria Mendoza is coming to visit her sister, riding astride, like a man, while her daughter rides side-saddle like a lady, even if her hair is an uncombed haystack. She looks the wild bandit-child she is. But -- now she's an engaged woman, her father forbids her to visit the brothel, even to pay a formal call on her good aunt! Ride back home, Teresa!

Sullen, she turns her horse round. Looking back at the brothel as she trots away, she sees Johnny gazing at her from his window; their eyes meet, Johnny's briefly veil.

Teresa is momentarily confused; then spurs her horse cruelly, gallops off, like a wild thing.

In the small hours, when the brothel has finally closed down for the night, Johnny plays Chopin for the Count. Tears of sentimental nostalgia roll down the old man's cheeks. And Vienna. . . is it still the same? Try not to remember. . . he pours himself another whisky. Then Johnny asks him softly, is it true what he's heard. . . stories circulating in the faraway Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Count starts.

The old legend, about the man who makes a pact with the devil to obtain a bullet that cannot miss its target. . .

An old legend, says the Count. In the superstitious villages, they believe such things still.

All kinds of shadows drift in through the open window.

The old legend, given a new lease of life by the exploits of a certain aristocrat, who vanished suddenly, left everything. And the Mendozas, here, the bandits -- aren't they all damned? Vicious, cruel. . . wouldn't a man who's sold his soul to the devil feel safest amongst the damned? Amongst whores and murderers?

The Count, shuddering, pours yet another whisky.

Is it true what they used to whisper, that the Count -- this Count, you! old man -- had a reputation as a marksman so extraordinary that everyone thought he had supernatural powers?

The Count, recovering himself, says: They said that of Paganini, that he must have learned how to play the fiddle from the devil. Since no human being could have played so well."

"And perhaps he did," says Johnny.

"You're a musician, not a murderer, Johnny."

"Stranglers and piano-players both need long fingers. But a bullet is more merciful," suggests Johnny obliquely.

Out of some kind of dream into which he's abruptly sunk, the Count says: "The seventh bullet belongs to the devil. That is how you pay --"

But tonight, he won't, can't say any more. He lurches off to bed, to Roxana, who's waiting for him, as she always does. But why, oh why, is the old man crying? The whisky makes you into a baby. . . but Roxana takes care of you, she's always taken care of you, ever since she found you.

Roxana mothers the newcomer, Johnny, too, but she also watches him, with troubled eyes. All he does is play the piano and brood obsessively over the Mendoza gunmen as they sport and play in the bar. Sometimes he inspects the Count's old rifle, hung up on the wall, strokes the barrel, caresses the stock; but he knows nothing about the arts of death at all. Nothing! And he takes no interest in the girls, that's unhealthy.

It seems to Roxana that there's a likeness between her old man and the young one. That crazy, black-clad dignity. They always seem to be chatting to one another and sometimes they talk in German. Roxana hates that, it makes her feel shut out, excluded.

Can he be, can young Johnny be. . . some son the Count begot and then abandoned, a child he'd never known, come all this way to find him?

Could it be?

Old man and young one, with eyes the same shape, hands the same shape. . . could it be?

And if it is, why don't they tell her, Roxana?

Secrets make her feel shut out, excluded. She sits in her room on the rocking-chair in the dusk, sipping tequila.

Voices below -- in German. She goes to her window, watches the Count and the piano-player wander off together in the direction of the little scummy pond in front of the brothel, which is set back off the main street.

She crosses herself, goes on rocking.

"Speak English, we must leave the Old World and its mysteries behind us," says the Count. "The old, weary, exhausted world. Leave it behind! This is a new country, full of hope. . ."

He is heavily ironic. The ancient rocks of the desert lour down in the sunset.

"But the landscape of this country is more ancient by far than we are, strange gods brood over it. I shall never be friends with it, never."

Aliens, strangers, the Count and Johnny watch the Mendozas ride out on the rampage, led by Teresa's father; a band of grizzled hooligans, firing off their guns, shouting.

Johnny, calm, quiet, tells the Count how the Mendozas killed his parents when they raided a train for the gold the train carried. His parents, both opera singers, on their way back across the continent from California, from a booking in San Francisco. . . and he far away, in Europe.

Mendoza himself tore the earrings from his mother's ears. And raped her. And somebody shot his father when his father tried to stop the rape. And then they shot his mother because she was screaming so loudly.

Calm, quiet, Johnny recounts all.

"We all have our tragedies."

"Some tragedies we can turn back on the perpetrators. I've planned my revenge. A suitably operatic revenge. I shall seduce the beautiful senorita and give her a baby. And if I can't shoot her father and mother, I shall find some way of strangling them with my beautiful pianist's hands."

Quiet, assured, deadly -- but incompetent. He doesn't know one end of a gun from the other; never raised his hand in anger in his life.

But he's been brooding on this revenge ever since the black-edged letter arrived at his lodgings in Vienna; in Vienna, where he heard how a nobleman made a pact with the devil, once, to ensure no bullet he ever fired would miss the mark. . .

"If you've planned it all so well, if you're dedicated to your vengeance. . ."

Johnny nods. Quiet, assured, deadly.

"If you're quite determined, then. . . you belong to the devil already. And a bullet is indeed more merciful than anger, if accurately fired."

And the Count has always hated Mendoza's contempt for himself and Roxana, who live on Mendoza's charity.

But Johnny has never used a gun in his life. Old man, old man, what have you to lose? You've nothing, you've come to a dead end, kept by a whore in a flyblown town at the end of all the roads you ever took. . . give me a gun that will never miss a shot; that will fire by itself. I know you know how to get one. I know --

"I have nothing to lose," says the Count inscrutably. "Except my sins, Johnny. Except my sins."

Teresa, sixteen, sullen, pretty, dissatisfied, retreats into her bedroom, into the depths of an enormous, gilded, four-poster bed looted from a train especially for her, surrounded by a jackdaw's nest of tawdry, looted glitter, gorges herself on chocolates, leafs through very very old fashion magazines. She hugs a scrawny kitten, her pet. Chickens roost on the canopy of her bed. Maa! maa! a goat pokes its head in through the open window. Teresa twitches with annoyance. You call this living?

Her door bursts open. An excited dog follows a flock of squawking chickens into the room; all the chickens roosting on the bed rise up, squawking. Chaos! The dog jumps on to the bed, begins to gnaw at the bloody something he carries in his mouth. Kitten rises on its hind legs to bat at the dog. Teresa hurls chocolates, magazines, screaming -- insupportable! She storms out of the room.

In the courtyard, her mother is slaughtering a screaming pig. That's the sort of thing the Mendoza women folk enjoy! Ugh. Teresa's made for better things, she knows it.

She wanders disconsolately out into the dusty street. Empty. Like my life, like my life.

Willows bend over the scummy pool in front of Roxana's brothel; it has a secluded air.

Teresa skulks beside the pool, sullenly throwing stones at her own reflection. Morning, slack time; in voluptuous déshabillé, the whores lean over the veranda: "Little Teresa! Little Teresa! Come in and see your auntie!" They laugh at her in her black stockings, her convent-girl dress, her rumpled hair.

Roxana's doing the books, behind the bar, with a pair of wire-rimmed glasses propped on her nose. The Count pours himself elevenses -- she looks up, is about to remonstrate with him, thinks better of it, returns to her sums. Morning sunshine; outside on the veranda, the whores giggle and wave at Teresa.

Johnny idly begins to play a Strauss waltz. Roxana's foot taps a little.

The Count puts down his whisky. Smiles. He approaches Roxana, presents his arm. She's startled -- then blushes, beams like a young girl. Takes off her glasses, pats her hair, glances at herself in the mirror behind the bar, pleasantly flustered. Seeing her pleasure, the Count becomes more courtly still. Still quite a fine figure of a man! And she, when she smiles, you see what a pretty girl she must have been.

Johnny flourishes the keys; he's touched. He begins to play a Strauss waltz in earnest.

Roxana takes the Count's proffered arm; they dance.

"Look! Look! Roxana's dancing!"

The whores flock back into the room, laughing, admiring. And begin to dance with one another, girl with girl, in their spoiled negligees, their unlaced corsets, petticoats, torn stockings.

Maddalena, partnerless, lingers on the veranda, teasing Teresa. Music spills out of the brothel.

"Teresa! Teresa! Come and dance with me!"

Slowly, slowly, Teresa arrives at the veranda, climbs the stairs, peers through a window as, flushed and breathless, the dancers collapse in a laughing heap.

She and Johnny exchange a flashing glance. But her aunt catches sight of her. "Teresa, Teresa, scram! This is no place for you!"

At the Mendozas' dinner-table, her father sits picking his teeth with his knife.

"I want to learn the piano, papa."

He continues to pick his teeth with his knife. She didn't want to learn the piano at the damn convent; why does she want to learn it now? To be a lady, Papa; isn't she going to have a grand wedding, marry a fine man? "Papa, I want to learn the piano."

Teresa is spoiled, indulged in everything. But her father likes to tease her; he'll drag out her pleading as long as he can. He doesn't often

have his daughter pleading with him. He cuts himself a chunk more meat, munches.

"And who will teach you piano in his hole, hm?"

"Johnny. Johnny at Aunt Roxana's."

He's suddenly really angry. You see what an animal he can become.

"What? My daughter learn piano in a brothel? Under the eye of that fat whore, Roxana?"

Maria leaps to her sister's defence, surging down on her husband with the carving knife held high. "Don't you insult my sister!"

Mendoza twists her wrist; she drops the knife. "I'm not having my daughter mixing with whores!"

"I want to learn piano," the spoiled child insists.

"Over my dead body will you go to Roxana's to learn the piano, not now you are an engaged girl."

"Then, papa, buy me a piano, let Johnny come here to teach me."

A creaking wagon delivers a shiny, new, baby grand in the courtyard of the rotting hacienda, among the grunting pigs and flapping chickens.

Effortlessly, it's installed in Teresa's room; entranced, she picks at the notes. "Kitty, kitty, the young man in the black jacket is coming to teach me piano. . ."

Her mother chaperones her, sitting, lolling in a rocking-chair, sipping tequila. Johnny, neat, elegant, a stranger, damned, with a portfolio of music under his arm, has come to give Teresa lessons. First, scales. . . soon, Czerny exercises. Johnny waits, watchful, biding his time.

Bored, her mother sips tequila and nods off to sleep. . . A Czerny exercise; Teresa hasn't quite mastered it. Making a mess of it, in fact. On purpose? Johnny's presence makes her flutter.

Johnny stands behind her, showing her where to put her hands. His long, white hands cover her little, brown paws with the bitten fingernails.

She turns to him. They kiss. She's eager, willing; he's surprised by her enthusiasm, almost taken aback. Despises her. It's going to be almost too easy!

But where is the seduction to be accomplished? Not in Teresa's bedroom, with her mother dozing in the rocking-chair. Not in Johnny's room at the brothel, either, under Aunt Roxana's watchful eye.

"In church, Johnny; nobody will look for lovers there."

A huge, cavernous, almost cathedral, built in expectation of mass conversions among the Indians, now almost in ruins, on a kind of bluff, brooding over the half-ruined village. Empty. And they make love on the floor of the church, the savage child, the vengeance-seeker. Afterwards, triumphant, she buries her face in his breast, shrieking for glee; he is detached, rejoicing in his own coldness, his own wickedness.

Naked, Teresa wanders down the aisle of the church towards the altar, stands looking up vaguely at the rococo Christ. She pokes out her tongue at her saviour.

"I'll be here again, soon. I'm going to be married."

"Married?"

"To a fine bandit gentleman." Makes a face. "Because I have no brothers, I am the heiress. My son will inherit everything, but first I must be married."

"Oh, no," says Johnny, lost, gone into his vengeance. "You won't be married. I won't let you be married."

Suspicious, at first. Then. . . "Do you love me?" Exultant, shouting. "So you love me! You must love me! You'll take me away!"

The Count rummages through a trunk in his and Roxana's bedroom, he gets out old books and curious instruments. The room is full of mysterious shadows. Roxana tries the door, finds that it is locked; she rattles the handle agitatedly. "What are you up to? What secrets do you have from me? Is it the old secret? Is it --"

The Count lets her in, takes her into his arms. "He'll take the burden from me, Roxana. He wants to, he's willing, he knows. . ."

"Your. . . son has come to set you free?"

"Not my son, Roxana."

She is so relieved that she almost forgets the dark import of what he's saying. Yet she must ask him: "And what's the price?"

"High, Roxana. Do you love a poor old man, do you love him more than you love your kin?"

Wide-eyed, she stares at him.

"Yes, old man, I do believe I do. It's been so long, now, since we've been together. . ."

"We'll be together forever, Roxana."

So he goes on assembling his occult materials and now she helps him. She has only one reservation. "The little Teresa, nothing must happen to her. . ."

"No. Not Teresa. What harm has she ever done to anyone? Not Teresa."

An eclipse of the moon. In the church, in darkness, at the altar, the Count and Johnny summon the appropriate demon -- the Archer of the Dark Abyss. Such a storm! Out of nowhere, a great wind, whirling the dust into a sandstorm. Roxana, alone in her bedroom full of curious shadows, draws the shutters close and mutters prayers, incantations.

The great wind blows open the doors of the church, sets them creaking on their hinges. Out of the sandstorms, hallucinatory figures emerge and merge, figures of demons or gods not necessarily those of Europe. The unknown continent, the new world, issues forth its banned daemonology.

The Count has summoned up more than he bargained for. He and Johnny crouch in the pentacle; Aztec and Toltec gods appear in giant forms. The church seems to have disappeared.

When the ritual is done, all clears; the interior of the church is a shambles, however, the Christ over the altar cast down on its face. Johnny and the Count pick themselves up from the floor, where the wind has left them. The Count is coughing horribly, his face is livid; the rite has nearly killed him.

Outside, all is calm now, a clear, bright night. The moon is back in the heavens again. Johnny, a man in the grip of a mania, stern, firm, helps the shaking Count to his feet.

"Where is the weapon?"

"He has come. He's waiting. He'll give it to us."

Outside, against the wall, so still he's almost part of the landscape, an Indian sits in the dark, poncho, slouch hat, waiting, impassive.

The Count, leaning heavily on Johnny, greets the Indian with some courtly ceremony. But Johnny barks: "Got the gun?"

"I got it."

The gun changes hands. Johnny grabs it.

"How much?"

"On account," says the Indian and grins. "On account."

He tips his hat. His pony, in the graveyard, grazes on a grave. The two Europeans watch him walk towards his pony, mount, ride. In the immense stillness of the night, his hoofbeats diminish.

Johnny inspects the Winchester repeater in his hands; it looks perfectly normal. Not used to guns, he handles it clumsily. His disappointment is obvious.

"What's so special about it? Could have bought one in the store."

"It will fire seven bullets," says the Count, impassive as any Indian. "And the seventh bullet is the one that *he* put in it, it belongs to him."

"But --"

"The seventh bullet is the devil's own. He will fire the seventh shot for you, even though you pull the trigger. But the other six can't miss their targets. Though you've never used a gun before."

Incredulous, Johnny takes aim, fires at a movement in the darkness. He rushes towards the scream. His target, Teresa's kitten, dead.

"Five left now, for your own use," says the Count. "Use them sparingly. They come at a high price."

Teresa wants her kitten. "Kitty! Kitty!" But the kitten doesn't come. "The dogs have eaten it," says Teresa's mother. "And hold still, Teresa, you're wriggling like an eel; how can I fit your wedding-dress. . . ?"

It's a store-bought wedding-dress, come on the stagecoach from Mexico City. All white lace. And a veil! In front of the clouded mirror in Teresa's bedroom, Maria pops the veil on her daughter's head; what a picture. But Teresa sulks.

"I don't want to get married."

Too bad, Teresa! Tomorrow you must and will get married.

I won't. I won't!

You won't wheedle your father out of this one, not this time.

Teresa, in her wedding finery, picks out a few notes of the "Wedding March" on her piano; furious, she slams the lid shut.

Johnny, at the piano in the whorehouse, plays a few bars of the "Wedding March"; a wedding guest, drunk, flings his glass at the mirror behind the bar, smashing it. The whores superstitiously huddle and mutter. The place is packed out with wedding guests, all notable villains. But there is too much tension to be any joy. Roxana, unsmiling, rings up the price of a replacement mirror on her cash register. The Count, morose, stoops over his drink at the bar. The wedding guests treat him with genial contempt.

Teresa creeps out of her bedroom window, steals along the street, conceals herself hastily in the shadows when an Indian on a pony comes riding down the street.

Her lover waits for her by the scummy pond. Take me away. Save me! He strokes her hair with the first sign of tenderness. Perhaps he *will* take her away, if she can bear to look at him after the holocaust. Perhaps. . .

It's very late, now. Only the Count stays up. He's gazing at the recumbent form of a wedding guest passed out on the floor, snoring. The whores have stuck a feather hat on the visitor's head, taken off his trousers, daubed his face with rouge.

When Johnny comes in, the Count silently pours him a drink. He looks at the boy with, almost, love -- certainly with some emotion.

"I could almost ask you. . ."

Johnny smiles, shakes his head, whistles a few bars of Chopin's "Funeral March".

"But then. . . be good to the little Teresa. 'The prince of darkness is a gentleman. . .' "

Maybe. Maybe not. But, maybe. . .

How Teresa's hair tangles in the comb! A great bustle in the Mendoza encampment; they've got a carriage for her, decked it with exuberant paper flowers. But she herself is nervous, anxious; she chews at her underlip, she lets the women dress her as if she were a doll. Her mother, oddly respectable in black, weeps copiously. Teresa, in her wedding-dress and veil, suddenly turns to her mother and hugs her convulsively. The woman returns the embrace fiercely.

Johnny kisses the photographs of his father and mother. It's time. Unhandily carrying the rifle, in his music student's black velvet jacket, elegant, deadly, mad, he goes towards the church.

They've put back the rococo, suffering Christ; Johnny crouches beneath him, hiding under the skirts of the altar cloth. He tests the weight of the gun in his hand, peers through the sights.

The Count won't go to the wedding. No, he won't! He won't get out of bed. Please, Roxana, don't you go to the wedding, either! What? Not see

my little niece Teresa get married? And you should come, too, you irreligious old man. Aren't you fond of Teresa?

But the Count is sick this morning. He can't crawl out of bed. He coughs, stares at the ominous bloodstains on his handkerchief.

"I'm dying, Roxana. Don't leave me."

Though the bridegroom has arrived already, a huge brute, the image of Teresa's father. He takes his place before the altar. The congregation rustles. The organ plays softly.

Roxana, late, troubled, untidily dressed, slips in at the back of the church.

Teresa steps out of the flower-decorated carriage in front of the church. She's really worried, now, looking desperately around for Johnny. Her mother kisses her, again; this time, the girl doesn't respond, she's got too much on her mind. Her mother and the Mendoza women folk enter the church. Her father, a little dressed up, boots polished, offers her his arm.

Traditional gasps as she walks down the aisle -- isn't she lovely! Even if her eyes search round and round the church for her rescuer. Where can he be? What will he do to save me?

The organ rings out.

Teresa arrives beside her bridegroom. From beneath her veil, she gives him a swift glance of furious dislike. The priest says the first words of the wedding service.

Johnny flings back the altar cloth, leaps on the altar, shoots point-blank the wide-eyed, open-mouthed Mendoza.

Mendoza tumbles backwards down the altar steps.

Silence. Then, shouting. Then, gunfire. Havoc!

But no bullet can touch Johnny; he shoots the bridegroom as the bridegroom leaps forward to attack him; shoots three -- four -- into the crowd of Mendoza desperadoes, two men fall.

Teresa, in her wedding finery, stands speechless, shocked.

Her mother, wailing, rushes from the crowd towards her dead husband.

Johnny aims, shoots Maria. She drops dead on to the body of her husband.

Teresa at last wakes up. She rushes through the havoc in the church; she is appalled, the world has come to an end.

Roxana fights free of the crowd and goes running after her. The church is a melee of shots, noise, gunsmoke.

Outside the church, the girl and woman meet. Teresa can't speak. Roxana hugs her, grabs her hand, pulls her down the path, towards the whorehouse.

Johnny erupts from the church door. Now he's like a mad dog. Blazing, furious, deadly -- carrying a gun.

By the scummy pool, Roxana hears Johnny coming after them. She drags Teresa faster, faster -- the girl stumbles over her white lace hem, now filthy with dust and blood. Faster, faster -- he's coming, the murderer's coming, the devil himself is coming!

The Count's mistress and the beloved little Teresa run towards the whorehouse, where the Count gazes out of the window; run towards him, with the madman hot on their heels.

The Count opens the whorehouse door.

He's carrying the rifle that hangs on the wall of the bar.

Slowly, shakily, he raises it.

He's aiming at Johnny.

Teresa sees him, breaks free of Roxana's hand, dashes back towards her lover -- to try to protect him? Some reason, sufficient to her hysteria.

Johnny, startled, halts; so the old man's turned against him, has he? The old man's turned his own magic rifle on the young one, the acolyte!

He takes aim at the Count, fires the seventh bullet.

He's forgotten it's the seventh bullet, forgotten everything except the sudden ease with which he can kill.

He fires the seventh bullet and Teresa drops dead by the side of the scummy pool. Her lace train slides down into the water.

The Count bursts into a great fit of tears. Roxana kneels by the dead girl, uselessly speaks to her, closes her eyes gently. Crosses herself. Gives the weeping Count, slumped on the whorehouse veranda, a long, dark look.

The crowd spills out of the church. Johnny drops his gun, turns, runs.

Coda

Almost the desert. White, fantastic rocks, sand, burning sun. Johnny stole one of the Mendozas' horses; now it founders beneath him.

He shades his eyes; there's a village in the distance. . .

But this village seems deserted. A weird, shabby figure in his music-student's black jacket, he draws water from the well, drinks. At last, a thin, ragged, filthy child emerges from the derelict house.

"The smallpox came. All dead, all dead."

Flies buzz on an unburied corpse in a murky interior. Johnny retches. He's white-faced, fevered -- you would have said, a man with the devil pursuing him.

At the end of the village, gazing across the acres of desert before him, a figure is propped against the wall, a figure so still, so silent as at first to seem part of the landscape. He smiles to see Johnny stumbling towards him.

"I was waiting for you," says the Indian who sold Johnny the gun. "We have some business to conclude."

The Merchant of Shadows

I killed the car. And at once provoked such sudden, resonant quiet as if, when I switched off the ignition, I myself brought into being the shimmering late afternoon hush, the ripening sun, the very Pacific that, way below, at the foot of the cliff, shattered its foamy peripheries with the sound of a thousand distant cinema organs.

I'd never get used to California. After three years, still the enchanted visitor. However frequently I had been disappointed, I still couldn't help it, I still tingled with expectation, still always thought that something wonderful might happen.

Call me the Innocent Abroad.

All the same, you can take the boy out of London but you can't take London out of the boy. You will find my grasp of the local lingo enthusiastic but shaky. I call gas "petrol", and so on. I don't intend to go native, I'm not here for good, I'm here upon a pilgrimage. I have hied me, like a holy palmer, from the dishevelled capital of a foggy, three-cornered island on the other side of the world where the light is only good for water-colourists to this place where, to wax metaphysical about it, Light was made Flesh.

I am a student of Light and Illusion. That is, of cinema. When first I clapped my eyes on that HOLLYWOODLAND sign back in the city now five hours' hard drive distant, I thought I'd glimpsed the Holy Grail.

And now, as if it were the most everyday thing in the world, I was on my way to meet a legend. A living legend, who roosted on this lonely cliff-top like a forlorn seabird.

I was parked in a gravelled lot where the rough track I'd painfully negotiated since I left the minor road that brought me from the freeway terminated. I shared the parking lot with a small, red, crap-caked Toyota truck that, some time ago, had seen better days. There was straw in the back. Funny kind of transportation for a legend. But I knew she was in there, behind the gated wall in front of me, and I needed a little time along

with the ocean before the tryst began. I climbed out of the car and crept close to the edge of the precipice.

The ocean shushed and tittered like an audience when the lights dim before the main feature.

The first time I saw the Pacific, I'd had a vision of sea gods, but not the ones *I* knew, oh, no. Not even Botticelli's prime 36B cup blonde ever came in on *this* surf. My entire European mythology capsized under the crash of waves Britannia never ruled and then I knew that the denizens of these deeps are *sui generis* and belong to no mythology but their weird own. They have the strangest eyes, lenses on stalks that go flicker, flicker, and give you the truth twenty-four times a second. Their torsos luminesce in every shade of technicolor but have no depth, no substance, no dimensionality. Beings from a wholy strange pantheon. Beautiful -- but alien.

Aliens were somewhat on my mind, however, perhaps because I was somewhat alienated myself in LA, but also due to the obsession of my room-mate. While I researched my thesis, I was rooming back there in the city in an apartment over a New Age bookshop-cum-healthfood restaurant with a science fiction freak I'd met at a much earlier stage of studenthood during the chance intimacy of the mutual runs in Barcelona. Now he and I subsisted on brown rice courtesy of the Japanese waitress from downstairs, with whom we were both on, ahem, intimate terms, and he was always talking about aliens. He thought most of the people you met on the streets were aliens cunningly simulating human beings. He thought the Venusians were behind it.

He said he had tested Hiroko's reality quotient sufficiently and *she* was clear, but I guessed from his look he wasn't too sure about me. That shared diarrhoea in the Plaza Real was providing a shaky bond. I stayed out of the place as much as possible. I kept my head down at school all day and tried to manifest humanity as well as I knew how whenever I came home for a snack, a shower and, if I got the chance, one of Hiroko's courteous if curiously impersonal embraces. Now my host showed signs of getting into leather. Would it soon be time to move?

It must be the light that sends them crazy, that white light now refracting from the sibilant Pacific, the precious light that, when it is distilled, becomes the movies. *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae,* the Great Art

of Light and Shade as Athanias Kircher put it, he who tinkered with magic lanterns four centuries ago in the Gothic north.

And from that Gothic north had come the object of the quest that brought me to this luminous hill-top -- a long-dead Teutonic illusionist who'd played with light and shade as well as any. You know him as Hank Mann, that "dark genius of the screen", the director with "the occult touch", that neglected giant etc. etc. etc.

But stay, you may ask, how can a dead man, no matter how occult his touch, be the object of a quest?

Aha! In that cliff-top house he'd left the woman, part of whose legend was she was his widow.

He had been her ultimate husband. First (silent movies) she'd hitched up with an acrobatic cowboy and, when a pinto threw him, she'd joined a *soi-disant* Viennese tenor for a season of kitschissimo musicals during early sound. Hank Mann turned her into an icon after he rescued her off a cardboard crag where he'd come upon her, yodelling. When Mann passed on, she shut up marital shop entirely, and her screen presence acquired the frozen majesty of one appreciating, if somewhat belatedly, the joys of abstinence. She never did another on-screen love scene, either.

If you are a true buff, you know that he was born Heinrich von Mannheim. One or two titles in two or three catalogues survive from his early days at UFA, plus a handful of scratched, faded stills.

My correspondence with his relict, conducted through somebody who pp'd for her in an illegible scrawl, finally produced this invitation. I'd been half-stunned with joy. I was, you understand, writing my thesis about Mannheim. He had become my pet, my hobby, my obsession.

But you must understand that I was prevaricating out of pure nerves. For she was far, far more than a Hollywood widow; she was the Star of Stars, no less, the greatest of them all. . . dubbed by *Time* magazine the "Spirit of the Cinema" when, on her eightieth birthday, she graced its cover for the seventh time, with a smile like open day in a porcelain factory and a white lace mantilla on the curls that time had bleached with its inexorable peroxide. And had she not invited me, me! to call for a chat, a drink, at this ambiguous hour, martini-time, the blue hour, when you fold up the day and put it away and shake out the exciting night?

Only surely she was well past the expectation of exciting times. She had become what Hiroko's people call a "living national treasure".

Decade after ageless decade, movie after movie, "the greatest star in heaven". That was the promo. She'd no especial magic, either. She was no Gish, nor Brooks, nor Dietrich, nor Garbo, who all share the same gift, the ability to reveal otherness. She *did* have a certain touch-me-not thing, that made her a natural for *film noir* in the Forties. Otherwise, she possessed only the extraordinary durability of her presence, as if continually incarnated afresh with the passage of time due to some occult operation of the Great Art of Light and Shade.

One odd thing. As Svengali, Hank Mann had achieved a posthumous success. Although it was he who had brushed her with stardust (she'd been a mere "leading player" up till then), her career only acquired that touch of the fabulous after he adjourned to the great cutting room in the sky.

There was a scent of jasmine blowing over the wall from an invisible garden. I deeply ingested breath. I checked out my briefcase: notebook, recorder, tapes. I checked that the recorder contained tape. I was nervous as hell. And then there was nothing for it but, briefcase in hand, to summon the guts to stride up to her gate.

It was an iron gate with a sheet of zinc behind the wrought squiggles so you couldn't see through and, when I reached up to ring the bell, this gate creaked open of its own accord to let me in and then swung to behind me with a disconcerting, definitive clang. So there I was.

A plane broke the darkening dish of sky, that sealed up again behind it. Inside the garden, it was very quiet. Nobody came to meet me.

A flight of rough-cut stone steps led up to a pool surrounded by clumps of sweet-smelling weeds; I recognised lavender. A tree or two dropped late summer leaves on scummy water and, when I saw that pool, I couldn't help it, I started to shiver; I'll tell you why in a minute. That untended pool, in which a pair of dark glasses with one cracked lens rested on an emerald carpet of algae, along with an empty gin bottle.

On the terrace, a couple of rusty, white-enamelled chairs, a lop-sided table. Then, fringed by a clump of cryptomeria, the house von Mannheim caused to be erected for his bride.

That house made the Bauhaus look baroque. An austere cube of pure glass, it exhibited the geometry of transparency at its most severe. Yet, just at that moment, it took all the red light of the setting sun into itself and flashed like a ruby slipper. I knew the wall of the vast glittering

lounge gaped open to admit me, and only me, but I thought, well, if nobody has an objections, I'll just stick around on the terrace for a while, keep well away from that glass box that looks like nothing so much as the coffin for a classical modernist Snow White; let the lady come out to me.

No sound but the deep, distant bass of the sea; a gull or two; pines, hushing one another.

So I waited. And waited. And I found myself wondering just what it was the scent of jasmine reminded me of, in order to take my mind off what I knew damn well the swimming pool reminded me of -- *Sunset Boulevard,* of course. And I knew damn well, of course I knew, that this was indeed the very pool in which my man Hank Mann succumbed back in 1940, so very long ago, when not even I nor my blessed mother, yet, was around to so much as piss upon the floor.

I waited until I found myself growing impatient. How does one invoke the Spirit of Cinema? Burn a little offering of popcorn and old fan magazines? Offer a libation of Jeyes' Fluid mixed with Kia Ora orange?

I found myself vengefully asserting that I knew one or two things about her old man that perhaps she never knew herself. For example, his grandmother's maiden name (Ernst). I knew he entered UFA and swept the cutting-room floor. I talked to the son he left behind in Germany shortly after conceiving him. Nice old buffer, early sixties, retired bank clerk, prisoner of war in Norfolk, England, 1942-6, perfect English, never so much as met his father, no bitterness. Brought up exclusively by the first Frau Mannheim, actress. He showed me a still. Kohled eyes, expressionist cheek-bones, star of Mannheim's UFA one-reeler of *The Fall of the House of Usher,* now lost. Frau von Mannheim, victim of the Dresden fire raid. Hm. Her son expressed no bitterness at that, either, and I felt ashamed until he told me she'd ended up the official mistress of a fairly nasty Nazi. Then I felt better.

I'd actually got to meet the second Mrs Mann, now a retired office cleaner and full-time lush in downtown LA. Once a starlet; lack of exposure terminated her career. Once a call girl. Age terminated her career. The years had dealt hardly with her. Vaguely, she recalled him, a man she once married. She'd had a hangover, he moved into her apartment. She'd still had a hangover. Then he moved out. *God,* she'd had a hangover. They divorced and she married somebody else, whose name escaped her.

She accepted ten bucks off me with the negligent grace of habitual custom. I couldn't think why he'd married her and she couldn't remember.

Anyway, after I'd donated ten bucks and packed up my tape recorder, she, as if now I'd paid she felt she owed, started to rummage around amongst the cardboard boxes -- shoe boxes, wine crates -- with which her one-room competency was mostly furnished. Things tipped and slithered everywhere, satin dancing slippers, old hats, artificial flowers; spilled face powder rose up in clouds and out of the clouds, she, wheezing with triumph, emerged with a photograph.

Nothing so quaint as out-of-date porn. It was an artfully posed spanking pic. I knew him at once, with his odd, soft, pale, malleable face, the blond, slicked-down hair, the moustache, in spite of the gym slip, suspenders and black silk stockings; he sprawled athwart the knee of the second Mrs Mann, who sported a long-line leather bra and splendid boots. Hand raised ready to smack his exposed botty, she turned upon the camera a toothy smile. She'd been quite pretty, in a spit-curled way. She said I could have the snap for a couple of hundred dollars but I was on a tight budget and thought it wouldn't add much to the history of film.

Foresightfully, von Mannheim had left Germany in good time, but he started over in Hollywood at the bottom (forgive the double entendre). His ascent, however, was brisk. Assistant art director, assistant director, director.

The masterpiece of Mann's Hollywood period is, of course, *Paracelsus* (1937), with Charles Laughton. Laughton's great bulk swims into pools of scalding light out of greater or lesser shoals of darkness like a vast monster of the deep, a great, black whale. The movie haunts you like a bad dream. Mann did not try to give you a sense of the past; instead, *Paracelsus* looks as if it had been made in the middle ages -- the gargoyle faces, bodies warped with ague, gaunt with famine, a claustrophobic sense of a limited world, of chronic, cramped unfreedom.

The Spirit of Cinema cameos in *Paracelsus* as the Gnostic goddess of wisdom, Sophia, in a kind of Rosicrucian sabbat scene. They were married, by then. Mann wanted his new bride nude for this sabbat, which caused a stir at the time and eventually he was forced to shoot only her disembodied face floating above suggestive shadow. Suggestive, indeed; from his piece of sleight of hand sprang two myths, one, easily discredited by aficionados of the rest of her oeuvre, that she had the biggest knockers

in the business, the other, less easily dismissed, that she was thickly covered with body hair from the sternum to the knee. Even Mann's ex-assistant director believed the latter. "Furry as a spider," he characterised her. "And just as damn lethal." I'd smuggled a half-pint of Jack Daniels into his geriatric ward; he waxed virulent, he warned me to take a snake-bite kit to the interview.

Paracelsus was, needless to say, one of the greatest box-office disasters in the history of the movies. Plans were shelved for his long-dreamed-of *Faust*, with the Spirit either as Gretchen or as Mephistopheles, or as Gretchen doubling *with* Mephistopheles, depending on what he said in different interviews. Mann was forced to perpetrate a hack job, a wallowing melo with the Spirit as twins, a good girl in a blonde wig and a bad girl in a black one, from which his career never recovered and her own survival truly miraculous.

Shortly after this notorious stinker was released to universal jeers, he did the *A Star is Born* bit, although he walked, not into the sea, but into the very swimming pool, that one over there, in which his relict now disposes of her glassware.

As for the Spirit, she found a new director, was rumoured to have undergone a little, a very little plastic surgery, and, the next year, won her first Oscar. From that time on she was unstoppable, though always she carried her tragedy with her, like a permanent widow's veil, giving her the spooky allure of a born-again *princesse lointaine*.

Who liked to keep her guests waiting.

In my nervous ennui, I cast my eyes round and round the terrace until I came upon something passing strange in the moist earth of a flowerbed.

Moist, therefore freshly watered, though not by whatever it was had left such amazing spoor behind it. No big-game hunter I, but I could have sworn that, impressed on the soil, as if in fresh concrete outside Graumann's Chinese Theatre, was the print, unless the tiger lilies left it, of a large, clawed paw.

Did you know a lion's mane grows grey with age? I didn't. But the geriatric feline that now emerged from a clump of something odorous beneath the cryptomeria had snow all over his hairy eaves. He appeared as taken aback to see me as I was to bump into him. Our eyes locked. Face like a boxer with a broken nose. Then he tilted his enormous head to one

side, opened his mouth -- God, his breath was foul -- and roared like the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth. With a modest blow of a single paw, he could have batted me arse over tip off the cliff half-way to Hawaii. I wouldn't say it was much comfort to see he'd had his teeth pulled out.

"Aw, come on, Pussy, he don't want to be gummed to death," said a cracked, harsh, aged, only residually female voice. "Go fetch Mama, now, there's a good boy."

The lion grumbled a little in his throat but trotted off into the house with the most touching obedience and I took breath, again -- I noticed I'd somehow managed not to for some little time -- and sank into one of the white metal terrace chairs. My poor heart was going pit-a-pat, I can tell you, but the *personage* who had at last appeared from somewhere in the darkening compound neither apologised for nor expressed concern about my nasty shock. She stood there, arms akimbo, surveying me with a satirical, piercing, blue eye.

Except for the jarring circumstances that in one hand she held a stainless steel, many-branched candlestick of awesomely chaste design, she looked like a superannuated lumberjack, plaid shirt, blue jeans, workboots, butch leather belt with a giant silver skull and crossbones for a buckle, coarse, cropped, grey hair escaping from a red bandana tied Indian-style around her head. Her skin was wrinkled in pinpricks like the surface of Parmesan cheese and a putty grey in colour.

"You the one that's come about the thesis?" she queried. Her diction was pure hillbilly.

I burbled in the affirmative.

"He's come about the thesis," she repeated to herself sardonically and discomforted me still further by again cackling to herself.

But now an ear-splitting roar announced action was about to commence. This Ma, or Pa, Kettle person set down her candlestick on the terrace table, briskly struck a match on the seat of her pants and applied the flame to the wicks, dissipating the gathering twilight as She rolled out the door. Rolled. She sat in a chrome and ivory leather wheel-chair as if upon a portable throne. Her right hand rested negligently on the lion's mane. She was a sight to see.

How long had she spent dressing up for the interview? Hours. Days. Weeks. She had on a white satin bias-cut lace-trimmed negligee circa 1935, her skin had that sugar almond, one hundred per cent Max

Factor look and she wore what I assumed was a wig due to the unnatural precision of the snowy curls. Only she'd gone too far with the wig; it gave her a Medusa look. Her mouth looked funny because her lips had disappeared with age so all that was left was a painted-in red trapezoid.

But she didn't look her age, at all, at all -- oh, no; she looked a good ten or fifteen years younger, though I doubt the vision of a sexy septuagenarian was the one for which she'd striven as she decked herself out. Impressive, though. Impressive as hell.

And you knew at once this was the face that launched a thousand ships. Not because anything lovely was still smouldering away in those old bones; she'd, as it were, transcended beauty. But something in the way she held her head, some imperious arrogance, demanded that you look at her and keep on looking.

At once I went into automatic, I assumed the stance of gigolo. I picked up her hand, kissed it, said: *"Enchanté"*, bowed. Had I not been wearing sneakers, I'd have clicked my heels. The Spirit appeared pleased but not surprised by this, but she couldn't smile for fear of cracking her make-up. She whispered me a throaty greeting, eyeing me in a very peculiar way, a way that made the look in the lion's eye seem positively vegetarian.

It freaked me. She freaked me. It was her *star quality.* So *that's* what they mean! I thought. I'd never before, nor am I likely to again, encountered such psychic force as streamed out of that frail little old lady in her antique lingerie and her wheel-chair. And, yes, there was something undeniably erotic about it, although she was old as the hills; it was as though she got the most extraordinary sexual charge from being looked at and this charge bounced back on the looker, as though some mechanism inside herself converted your regard into sexual energy. I wondered, not quite terrified, if I was for it, know what I mean.

And all the time I kept thinking, it kept running through my head: "The phantom is up from the cellars again!"

Night certainly brought out the scent of jasmine.

She whispered me a throaty greeting. Her faded voice meant you had to crouch to hear her, so her cachou-flavoured breath stung your cheek, and you could tell she loved to make you crouch.

"My sister," she husked, gesturing towards the lumberjack lady who was watching this performance of domination and submission with

her thumbs stuck in her belt and an expression of unrelieved cynicism on her face. Her sister. God.

The lion rubbed its head against my leg, making me jump, and she pummelled its greying mane.

"And this -- oh! you'll have seen him a thousand times; more exposure than any of us. Allow me to introduce Leo, formerly of MGM."

The old beast cocked its head from side to side and roared again, in unmistakable fashion, as if to identify itself. Mickey Mouse does her chauffeuring. Every morning, she takes a ride on Trigger.

"Ars gratia artis," she reminded me, as if guessing my thoughts. "Where could he go, poor creature, when they retired him? Nobody would touch a fallen star. So he came right here, to live with Mama, didn't you, darling."

"Drinkies!" announced Sister, magnificently clattering a welcome, bottle-laden trolley.

After the third poolside martini, which was gin at which a lemon briefly sneered, I judged it high time to broach the subject of Hank Mann. It was pitch dark by then, a few stars burning, night sounds, sea sounds, the creak of those metal chairs that seemed to have been designed, probably on purpose, by the butch sister, to break your balls. But it was difficult to get a word in. The Spirit was briskly checking out my knowledge of screen history.

"No, the art director certainly was *not* Ben Carre, how absurd to think that!. . . My goodness me, young man, Wallace Reid was dead and buried by then, and good riddance to bad rubbish. . . Edith Head? Edith Head design Nancy Carroll's patent leather evening dress? Who put that into your noddle?"

Now and then the lion sandpapered the back of my hand with its tongue, as if to show sympathy. The butch sister put away gin by the tumblerful, two to my one, and creaked resonantly from time to time, like an old door.

"No, no, no, young man! Laughton certainly was *not* addicted to self-abuse!"

And out of the dark it came to me that that dreamy perfume of jasmine issued from no flowering shrub but, instead, right out of the opening sequence of *Double Indemnity,* do you remember? And I suffered a ghastly sense of incipient humiliation, of impending erotic doom, so that

I shivered, and Sister, alert and either comforting or complicitous, sloshed another half pint of gin into my glass.

Then Sister belched and announced: "Gonna take a leak."

Evidently equipped with night vision, she rolled off into the gloaming from whence, after a pause, came the tinkle of running water. She'd gone back to Nature as far as toilet training was concerned, cut out the frills. The raunchy sound of Sister making pee-pee brought me down to earth again. I clutched my tumbler, for the sake of holding something solid.

"About thish time," I said, "you met Hank Mann."

Night and candlelight turned the red mouth black, but her satin dress shone like water with plankton in it.

"Heinrich," she corrected with a click of orthodontics; and then, or so it seemed, fell directly into the trance for, all at once, she fixed her gaze on the middle distance and said no more.

I thankfully took advantage of her lapse of attention to pour my gin down the side of my chair, trusting that by the morrow it would be indistinguishable from lion piss. Sister, clanking her death's head belt-buckle as she readjusted her clothing, came back to us and juggled ice and lemon slices as if nothing untoward was taking place. Then, in a perfectly normal, even conversational tone, the Spirit said: "White kisses, red kisses. And coke in a golden casket on top of the baby grand. Those were the days."

Sister t'sked, possibly with irritation.

"Reckon you've had a skinful," said Sister. "Reckon you deserve a stiff whupping."

That roused the Spirit somewhat, who chuckled and lunged at the gin which, fortunately, stood within her reach. She poured a fresh drink down the hatch in a matter of seconds, then made a vague gesture with her left hand, inadvertently biffing the lion in the ear. The lion had dozed off and grumbled like an empty stomach to have his peace disturbed.

"They wore away her face by looking at it too much. So we made her a new one."

"Hee haw, hee haw," said Sister. She was not braying but laughing.

The Spirit propped herself on the arm of her wheel-chair and pierced me with a look. Something told me we had gone over some kind of

edge. Nancy Carroll's evening dress, indeed. Enough of that nonsense. Now we were on a different plane.

"I used to think of prayer wheels," she informed me. "Night after night, prayer wheels ceaselessly turning in the darkened cathedrals, those domed and gilded palaces of the Faith, the Majesties, the Rialtos, the Alhambras, those grottoes of the miraculous in which the creatures of the dream came out to walk within the sight of men. And the wheels spun out those subtle threads of light that wove the liturgies of that reverential age, the last great age of religion. While the wonderful people out there in the dark, the congregation of the faithful, the company of the blessed, they leant forward, they aspired upwards, they imbibed the transmission of divine light.

"Now, the priest is he who prints the anagrams of desire upon the stock; but whom does he project upon the universe? Another? Or, himself?"

All this was somewhat more than I'd bargained for. I fought with the gin fumes reeling in my head, I needed all my wits about me. Moment by moment, she became more gnomic. Surreptitiously, I fumbled with my briefcase. I wanted to get that tape recorder spooling away, didn't I; why, it might have been Mannheim talking.

"Is he the one who interprets the spirit or does the spirit speak through him? Or is he only, all the time, nothing but the merchant of shadows?

"Hie," she interrupted herself.

Then Sister, whose vision was not one whit impaired by time or liquor, extended her trousered leg in one succinct and noiseless movement and kicked my briefcase clear into the pool, where it dropped with a liquid plop.

In spite of the element of poetic justice in it, that my file on Mannheim should suffer the same fate as he, I must admit that now I fell into a great fear. I even thought they might have lured me here to murder me, this siren of the cinema and her weird acolyte. Remember, they had made me quite drunk; it was a moonless night and I was far from home; and I was trapped helpless among these beings who could only exist in California, where the light made movies and madness. And one of them had just arbitrarily drowned the poor little tools of my parasitic trade, leaving me naked and at their mercy. The kindly lion shook himself awake

and licked my hand again, perhaps to reassure me, but I wasn't expecting it and jumped half out of my skin.

The Spirit broke into speech again.

"She is only in semi-retirement, you know. She still spends three hours every morning looking through the scripts that almost break the mailman's back as he staggers beneath them up to her cliff-top retreat.

"Age does not wither her; we've made quite sure of that, young man. She still irradiates the dark, for did we not discover the true secret of immortality together? How to exist almost and only in the eye of the beholder, like a genuine miracle?"

I cannot say it comforted me to theorise this lady was, to some degree, possessed, and so was perfectly within her rights to refer to herself in the third person in that ventriloquial, insubstantial voice that scratched the ear as smoke scratches the back of the throat. But by whom or what possessed? I felt very close to the perturbed spirit of Heinrich von Mannheim and the metaphysics of the Great Art of Light and Shade, I can tell you. And speaking of the latter -- Athanias Kircher, author, besides, of *Spectacula Paradoxa Rerum* (1624), *The Universal Theatre of Paradoxes.*

Her eyelids were drooping now, and as they closed her mouth fell open, but she spoke no more.

The Sister broke the silence as if it were wind.

"That's about the long and short of it, young man," she said. "Got enough for your thesis?"

She heaved herself up with a sigh so huge that, horrors! it blew out all the candles and then, worse and worse! she left me alone with the Spirit. But nothing more transpired because the Spirit seemed to have passed, if not on, then out, flat out in her wheel-chair, and the inner light that brought out the shine on her satin dress was extinguished too. I saw nothing, until a set of floods concealed in the pines around us came on and everything was visible as common daylight, the old lady, the drowsing lion, the depleted drinks trolley, the slices of lemon ground into the terrace by my nervous feet, the little plants pushing up between the cracks in the paving, the black water of the swimming pool in which my overexcited, suddenly light-wounded senses hallucinated a corpse.

Which last resolved itself, as I peered, headachy and blinking, into my own briefcase, opened, spilling out a floating debris of papers and tape boxes. I poured myself another gin, to steady my nerves. Sister appeared

again, right behind my shoulder, making me jog my elbow so gin soaked my jeans. Her Indian headband had knocked rakishly askew, giving her a piratical air. In close-up, her bones, clearly visible under her ruined skin, reminded me of somebody else's, but I was too chilled, drunk and miserable to care whose they might be. She was cackling to herself, again.

"We hates y'all with the tape recorders," she said. "Reckon us folks thinks you is dancin' on our graves."

She aimed a foot at the brake on the Spirit's wheel-chair and briskly pushed it and its unconscious contents into the house. The lion woke up, yawned like the opening of the San Andreas fault and padded after. The sliding door slid to. After a moment, a set of concealing crimson curtains swished along the entire length of the glass wall and that was that. I half-expected to see the words, THE END, come up on the curtains, but then the lights went off and I was in the dark.

Unwilling to negotiate the crazy steps down to the gate, I reached sightlessly for the gin and sucked it until I fell into a troubled slumber.

And I awoke me on the cold hill-side.

Well, not exactly. I woke up to find myself tucked into the back seat of my own VW, parked on the cliff beside the Toyota truck in the grey hour before dawn, my frontal lobes and all my joints a-twang with pain. I didn't even try the gate of the house. I got out of the car, shook myself, got back in again and headed straight home. After a while, on the perilous road to the freeway, I saw in the driving mirror a vehicle approaching me from behind. It was the red Toyota truck. Sister, of course, at the wheel.

She overtook me at illicit speed, blasting the horn joyously, waving with one hand, her face split in a toothless grin. When I saw that smile, even though the teeth were missing, I knew who she reminded me of -- of a girl in a dirndl on a cardboard alp, smiling because at last she saw approaching her the man who would release her. . . If I hadn't, in the interests of scholarship, sat yawning through that dire operetta in the viewing booth, I would never have so much as guessed.

She must have hated the movies. Hated them. She had the lion in back. They looked as if they were enjoying the ride. Probably Leo had smiled for the cameras once too often, too. They parked at the place where the cliff road ended and waited there, quite courteously, until I was safely embarked among the heavy traffic, out of their lives.

How had they found a corpse to substitute for von Mannheim? A corpse was never the most difficult thing to come by in Southern California, I suppose. I wondered if, after all those years, they finally decided to let me in on the masquerade. And, if so, why.

Perhaps, having constructed this masterpiece of subterfuge, von Mannheim couldn't bear to die without leaving some little hint, somewhere, of how, having made her, he then *became* her, became a better she than she herself had ever been, and wanted to share with his last little acolyte, myself, the secret of his greatest hit. But, more likely, he simply couldn't resist turning himself into the Spirit one last time, couldn't let down his public. . . for they weren't to know I'd seen a picture of him in a frock, already, were they, although in those days, he still wore a moustache. And that clinched it, in my own mind, when I remembered the second Mrs Mann's spanking picture, although this conviction did not make me any the less ill at ease.

In the healthfood restaurant, Hiroko slapped the carrot-juicer with a filthy cloth and fed me brown rice and chilled bean-curd with chopped onion and ginger on top, pursing her lips with distaste; she herself only ate Kentucky fried chicken. Business was slack in the mid-afternoon and I wanted her to come upstairs with me for a while, to remind me there was more to flesh than light and illusion, but she shook her head.

"Boring," she said, offensively. After a while she added, though in no conciliatory tone, "Not just you. Everything. California. I've seen this movie. I'm going home."

"I thought you said you felt like an enemy alien at home, Hiroko."

She shrugged, staring through her midnight bangs at the white sunlight outside.

"Better the devil you know," she said.

I realised I was just a wild oat to her, a footnote to her trip, and, although she had been just the same to me, all the same I grew glum to realise how peripheral I was, and suddenly wanted to go home, too, and longed for rain again, and television, that secular medium.

The Ghost Ships

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Therefore that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forebearing of labor, feasting, or any other way upon any such account aforesaid, every person so offending shall pay for every offense five shillings as a fine to the county.

Statute enacted by the General Court of Massachusetts, May 1659, repealed 1681

'Twas the night before Christmas. Silent night, holy night. The snow lay deep and crisp and even. Etc. etc. etc.; let these familiar words conjure up the traditional anticipatory magic of Christmas Eve, and then -- forget it.

Forget it. Even if the white moon above Boston Bay ensures that all is calm, all is bright, there will be no Christmas *as such* in the village on the shore that now lies locked in a precarious winter dream.

(Dream, that uncensorable state. They would forbid it if they could.)

At that time, for we are talking about a long time ago, about three and a quarter hundred years ago, the newcomers had no more than scribbled their signatures on the blank page of the continent that was, as it lay under the snow, no whiter nor more pure than their intentions.

They plan to write more largely; they plan to inscribe thereon the name of God.

And that was why, because of their awesome piety, tomorrow, on Christmas Day, they will wake, pray and go about their business as if it were any other day.

For them, all days are holy but none are holidays.

New England is the new leaf they havejust turned over; Old England is the dirty linen their brethren at home have just -- did they not

recently win the English Civil War? -- washed in public. Back home, for the sake of spiritual integrity, their brothers and sisters have broken the graven images in the churches, banned the playhouses where men dress up as women, chopped down the village Maypoles because they welcome in the spring in altogether too orgiastic a fashion.

Nothing particularly radical about that, given the Puritans' basic premises. Anyone can see at a glance that a Maypole, proudly erect upon the village green as the sap is rising, is a godless instrument. The very thought of Cotton Mather, with blossom in his hair, dancing round the Maypole makes the imagination reel. No. The greatest genius of the Puritans lay in their ability to sniff out a pagan survival in, say, the custom of decorating a house with holly for the festive season; they were the stuff of which social anthropologists would be made!

And their distaste for the icon of the lovely lady with her bonny babe -- Mariolatry, graven images! -- is less subtle than their disgust at the very idea of the festive season itself. It was *the festivity* of it that irked them.

Nevertheless, it assuredly *is* a gross and heathenish practice, to welcome the birth of Our Saviour with feasting, drunkenness, and lewd displays of mumming and masquerading.

We want none of that filth in this new place.

No, thank you.

As midnight approached, the cattle in the byres lumbered down upon their knees in homage, according to the well-established custom of over sixteen hundred English winters when they had mimicked the kneeling cattle in the Bethlehem stable; then, remembering where they were in the nick of time, they hastily refrained from idolatry and hauled themselves upright.

Boston Bay, calm as milk, black as ink, smooth as silk. And suddenly, at just the hour when the night spins on its spindle and starts to unravel its own darkness, at what one could call, elsewhere, the witching hour --

I saw three ships come sailing in,
Christmas Day, Christmas Day,

I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day in the morning.

Three ships, silent as ghost ships; ghost ships of Christmas past.

And what was in those ships all three?

Not, as in the old song, "the Virgin Mary and her baby"; that would have done such grievous damage to the history of the New World that you might not be reading this in the English language even. No; the imagination must obey the rules of actuality. (Some of them, anyway.) Therefore I imagine that the first ship was green and leafy all over, built of mossy Yule logs bound together with ivy. It was loaded to the gunwales with roses and pomegranates, the flower of Mary and the fruit that represents her womb, and the mast was a towering cherry tree which, now and then, leaned down to scatter ripe fruit on the water in memory of the carol that nobody in New England now sang. The Cherry Tree Carol, that tells how, when Mary asked Joseph to pick her some cherries, he was jealous and spiteful and told her to ask the father of her unborn child to help her pick them -- and, at that, the cherry tree bowed down so low the cherries dangled in her lap, almost.

Clinging to the mast of this magic cherry tree was an abundance of equally inadmissible mistletoe, sacred since the dawn of time, when the Druids used to harvest it with silver sickles before going on to perform solstitial rites of memorable beastliness at megalithic sites all over Europe.

Yet more mistletoe dangled from the genial bundle of evergreens, the kissing bough, that invitation to the free exchange of precious bodily fluids.

And what is that bunch of holly, hung with red apples and knots of red ribbon? Why, it is a wassail bob.

This is what you did with your wassail bob. You carried it to the orchard with you when you took out a jar of hard cider to give the apple trees their Christmas drink. All over Somerset, all over Dorset, everywhere in the apple-scented cider country of Old England, time out of mind, they souse the apple trees at Christmas, get them good and drunk, soak them.

You pour the cider over the tree trunks, let it run down to the roots. You fire off guns, you cheer, you shout. You serenade the future apple crop and next year's burgeoning, you "wassail" them, you toast their fecundity in last year's juices.

But not in *this* village. If a sharp smell of fruit and greenery wafted from the leafy ship to the shore, refreshing their dreams, all the same, the immigration officials at the front of the brain, the port of entry for memory, sensed contraband in the incoming cargo and snapped: "Permission to land refused!"

There was a furious silent explosion of green leaves, red berries, white berries, of wet, red seeds from bursting pomegranates, of spattering cherries and scattering flowers; and cast to the winds and scattered was the sappy, juicy, voluptuous flesh of all the wood demons, tree spirits and fertility goddesses who had ever, once upon a time, contrived to hitch a ride on Christmas.

Then the ship and all it had contained were gone.

But the second ship now began to belch forth such a savoury aroma from a vent amidships that the most abstemious dreamer wrinkled his nose with pleasure. This ship rode low in the water, for it was built in the unmistakable shape of a pie dish and, as it neared shore, it could be seen that the deck itself was made of piecrust just out of the oven, glistening with butter, gilded with egg yolk.

Not a ship at all, in fact, but a Christmas pie!

But now the piecrust heaved itself up to let tumbling out into the water a smoking cargo of barons of beef gleaming with gravy, swans upon spits and roast geese dripping hot fat. And the figurehead of this jolly vessel was a boar's head, wreathed in bay, garlanded in rosemary, a roasted apple in its mouth and sprigs of rosemary tucked behind its ears. Above, hovering a pot of mustard, with wings.

Those were hungry days in the new-found land. The floating pie came wallowing far closer in than the green ship had done, close enough for the inhabitants of the houses on the foreshore to salivate in their sleep.

But then, with one accord, they recalled that burnt offerings and pagan sacrifice of pig, bird and cattle could never be condoned. In unison, they rolled over on to their other sides and turned their stern backs.

The ship span round once, then twice. Then, the mustard pot swooping after, it dove down to the bottom of the sea, leaving behind a bobbing mass of sweetmeats that dissipated itself gradually, like sea wrack, leaving behind only a single cannonball of the plum-packed Christmas pudding of Old England that the sea's omnivorous belly found too much, too indigestible, and rejected it, so that the pudding refused to sink.

The sleepers, freed from the ghost not only of gluttony but also of dyspepsia, sighed with relief.

Now there was only one ship left.

The silence of the dream lent this apparition an especial eeriness.

This last ship was packed to the gunwales with pagan survivals of the most concrete kind, the ones in -- roughly -- human shape. The masts and spars were hung with streamers, paperchains and balloons, but the gaudy decorations were almost hidden by the motley crew of queer types aboard, who would have been perfectly visible from the shore in every detail of their many-coloured fancy dress had anyone been awake to see them.

Reeling to and fro on the deck, tumbling and dancing, were all the mummers and masquers and Christmas dancers that Cotton Mather hated so, every one of them large as life and twice as unnatural. The rouged men dressed as women, with pillowing bosoms; the clog dancers, making a soundless rat-a-tat-tat on the boards with their wooden shoes; the sword dancers whacking their wooden blades and silently jingling the little bells on their ankles. All these riotous revellers used to welcome in the festive season back home; it was they who put the "merry" into Merry England!

And now, horrors! they sailed nearer and nearer the sanctified shore, as if intent on forcing the saints to celebrate Christmas whether they wanted to or no.

The saint the Church disowned, Saint George, was there, in paper armour painted silver, with his old foe, the Turkish knight, a chequered tablecloth tied round his head for a turban, fencing with clubs as they used to every Christmas in the Old Country, going from house to house with the mumming play that was rooted far more deeply in antiquity than the birth it claimed to celebrate.

This is the plot of the mumming play: Saint George and the Turkish knight fight until Saint George knocks the Turkish knight down. In comes the Doctor, with his black bag, and brings him back to life again -- a shocking mockery of death and resurrection. (Or else a ritual of revivification, depending on one's degree of faith, and also, of course, depending on one's degree of faith in what.)

The master of these floating revels was the Lord of Misrule himself, the clown prince of Old Christmas, to which he came from fathoms deep in time. His face was blackened with charcoal. A calf's tail was stitched on to the rump of his baggy pants, which constantly fell down, to be hitched up again after a glimpse of his hairy buttocks. His top hat sported paper roses. He carried an inflated bladder with which he merrily battered the dancing heads around him. He was a true antique, as old as the festival that existed at midwinter before Christmas was ever thought of. Older.

His descendants live, all year round, in the circus. He is mirth, anarchy and terror. Father Christmas is his bastard son, whom he has disowned for not being obscene enough.

The Lord of Misrule was there when the Romans celebrated the Winter Solstice, the hinge on which the year turns. The Romans called it Saturnalia and let the slaves rule the roost for the duration, when all was topsy-turvy and almost everything that occurred would have been illegal in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts at the time of the ghost ships, if not today.

Yet from the phantom festival on the bedizened deck came the old, old message: during the twelve days of Christmas, nothing is forbidden, everything is forgiven.

A merry Christmas is Cotton Mather's worst nightmare.

If a little merriment imparts itself to the dreams of the villagers, they do not experience it as pleasure. They have exorcised the vegetables, and the slaughtered beasts; they will not tolerate, here, the riot of unreason that used to mark, over there, the inverted season of the year when nights are longer than days and the rivers do not run and you think that when the sun sinks over the rim of the sea it might never come back again.

The village raised a silent cry: Avaunt thee! Get thee hence!

The riotous ship span round once, twice -- a third time. And then sank, taking its Dionysiac crew with it.

But, just as he was about to be engulfed, the Lord of Misrule caught hold of the Christmas pudding that still floated on the water. This Christmas pudding, sprigged with holly, stuffed with currants, raisins, almonds, figs, compressed all the Christmas contraband into one fearful sphere.

The Lord of Misrule drew back his arm and bowled the pudding towards the shore.

Then he, too, went down. The Atlantic gulped him. The moon set, the snow came down again and it was a night like any other winter night.

Except, next morning, before dawn, when all rose to pray in the shivering dark, the little children, thrusting their feet reluctantly into their cold shoes, found a juicy resistance to the progress of their great toes and, investigating further, discovered to their amazed and secret glee, each child a raisin the size of your thumb, wrinkled with its own sweetness, plump as if it had been soaked in brandy, that came from who knows where but might easily have dropped out of the sky during the flight overhead of a disintegrating Christmas pudding.

In Pantoland

"I"m bored with television," announced Widow Twankey from her easy chair in the Empyrean, switching off *The Late Show* and adjusting his/her falsies inside her outrageous red bustier. "I will descend again to Pantoland!"

In Pantoland,
Everything is grand.

Well, let's not exaggerate -- grandish. Not like what it used to be but, then, what is. Even so, all still brightly coloured -- garish, in fact, all your primaries, red, yellow, blue. And all excessive, so that your castle has more turrets than a regular castle, your forest is considerably more impenetrable than the average forest and, not infrequently, your cow has more than its natural share of teats and udders. We're talking multiple projections, here, spikes, sprouts, boobs, bums. It's a bristling world, in Pantoland, either phallic or else demonically, aggressively female and there's something archaic behind it all, archaic in the worst sense. Something positively filthy.

But all also two-dimensional, so that Maid Marian's house, in Pantoland's fictive Nottingham, is flat as a pancake. The front door may well open when she goes in, but it makes a hollow sound behind her when she slams it shut and the entire façade gets the shivers. Robin serenades her from below; she opens her window to riposte and what you see behind her of her bedroom is only a painted bedhead on a painted wall.

Of course, the real problem here is that it is Baron Hardup of Hardup Hall, father of Cinderella, stepfather of the Ugly Sisters, who, these barren days, all too often occupies the post of Minister of Finance in Pantoland. Occasionally, even now, the free-spenders such as Princess Badroulbador take things into their own hands and then you get some wonderful effects, such as a three-masted galleon in full sail breasting through tumultuous storms with thunder booming and lightning breaking

about the spars as the gallant ship takes Dick Whittington and his cat either away from or else back to London amidst a nostalgic series of *tableaux vivants* of British naval heroes such as Raleigh, Drake, Captain Cook and Nelson, discovering things or keeping the Channel safe for English shipping, while Dick gives out a full-throated contralto rendition of "If I had a hammer" with a chorus of rats in masks and tights, courtesy of the Italia Conti school.

Illusion and transformation, kitchen into palace with the aid of gauze etc. etc. etc. You know the kind of thing. It all costs money. And, sometimes, as if it were the greatest illusion of all, there might be an incursion of the real. Real horses, perhaps, trotting, neighing and whinnying, large as life. Yet "large as life" isn't the right phrase, at all, at all. "Large as life" they might be, in the context of the auditorium, but when the proscenium arch gapes as wide as the mouth of the ogre in *Jack and the Beanstalk,* those forty white horses pulling the glass coach of the princess look as little and inconsequential as white mice. They are real, all right, but insignificant, and only raise a laugh or round of applause if one of them inadvertently drops dung.

And sometimes there'll be a dog, often one of those sandy-coloured, short-haired terriers. On the programmes, it will say: "Chuckles, played by himself," just above where it says: "Cigarettes by Abdullah." (Whatever happened to Abdullah?) Chuckles does everything they taught him at dog-school -- fetches, carries, jumps through a flaming hoop -- but now and then he forgets his script, forgets he lives in Pantoland, remembers he is a real dog precipitated into a wondrous world of draughts and pungency and rustlings. He will run down to the footlights, he will look out over the daisy field of upturned, expectant faces and, after a moment's puzzlement, give a little questioning bark.

It was not like this when Toto dropped down into Oz; it is more like it was when Toto landed back, alas, in Kansas. Chuckles does not like it. Chuckles feels let down.

Then Robin Hood or Prince Charming or whoever it is has the titular -- and "tits" is the operative word with this one -- ownership of Chuckles in Pantoland, scoops him up against her bosom and he has been saved. He has returned to Pantoland. In Pantoland, he can live for ever.

In Pantoland, which is the carnival of the unacknowledged and the fiesta of the repressed, everything is excessive and gender is variable.

A Brief Look at the Citizens of Pantoland

THE DAME

Double-sexed and self-sufficient, the Dame, the sacred transvestite of Pantoland, manifests him/herself in a number of guises. For example he/she might introduce him/herself thus:

"My name is Widow Twankey." Then sternly adjure the audience: "Smile when you say that!"

Because Twankey rhymes with -- pardon me, vicar; and,

> Once upon a distant time,
> They talked in Pantoland in rhyme. . .

but now they talk in double entendre, which is a language all of its own and is accented, not with the acute or grave, but with the eyebrows. Double entendre. That is, everyday discourse which has been dipped in the infinite riches of a dirty mind.

She/he stars as Mother Goose. In *Cinderella,* you get two for the price of one with the Ugly Sisters. If they throw in Cinders' stepmother, that's a bonanza, that's three. Then there is Jack's Mum in *Jack and the Beanstalk* where the presence of cow and stem in close proximity rams home the "phallic mother" aspect of the Dame. The Queen of Hearts (who stole some tarts). Granny in *Red Riding Hood,* where the wolf -- "Ooooer!" -- gobbles her up. He/she pops up everywhere in Pantoland, tittering and squealing: "Look out, girls! There's a man!!!" wherever the Principal Boy (q.v.) appears.

Big wigs and round spots of rouge on either cheek and eyelashes longer than those of Daisy the Cow; crinolines that dip and sway and support a mass of crispy petticoats out of which comes running Chuckles the Dog dragging behind him a string of sausages plucked, evidently, from the Dame's fundament.

"Better out than in."

He/she bestrides the stage. His/her enormous footsteps resonate with the antique past. She brings with him the sacred terror inherent in those of his/her avatars such as Lisa Maron, the androgynous god-goddess

of the Abomey pantheon; the great god Shango, thunder deity of the Yorubas, who can be either male or female; the sacrificial priest who, in the Congo, dressed like a woman and was called "Grandma".

The Dame bends over, whips up her crinolines; she has three pairs of knee-length bloomers, which she wears according to mood.

One pair of bloomers is made out of the Union Jack, for the sake of patriotism.

The second pair of bloomers is quartered red and black, in memory of Utopia.

The third and vastest pair of bloomers is scarlet, with a target on the seat, centred on the arsehole, and *this* pair is wholly dedicated to obscenity.

Roars. Screams. Hoots.

She turns and curtsies. And what do you know, she/he has shoved a truncheon down her trousers, hasn't she?

In Burgundy, in the Middle Ages, they held a Feast of Fools that lasted all through the dead days, that vacant lapse of time during which, according to the hairy-legged mythology of the Norsemen, the sky wolf ate up the sun. By the time the sky wolf puked it up again, a person or persons unknown had fucked the New Year back into being during the days when all the boys wore sprigs of mistletoe in their hats. Filthy work, but *somebody* had to do it. By the fourteenth century, the far-from-hairy-legged Burgundians had forgotten all about the sky wolf, of course; but had they also forgotten the orgiastic non-time of the Solstice, which, once upon a time, was also the time of the Saturnalia, the topsy-turvy time, "the Liberties of December", when master swapped places with slave and anything could happen?

The mid-winter carnival in Old Burgundy, known as the Feast of Fools, was reigned over in style by a man dressed as a woman whom they used to call Mère Folle, Crazy Mother.

Crazy Mother turns round and curtsies. She pulls the truncheon out of her bloomers. All shriek in terrified delight and turn away their eyes. But when the punters dare to look again, they encounter only his/her seraphic smile and, lo and behold! the truncheon has turned into a magic wand.

When Widow Twankey/the Queen of Hearts/Mother Goose taps Daisy the Cow with her wand, Daisy the Cow gives out with a chorus of

"Down by the Old Bull and Bush".

THE BEASTS

1 *The Goose* in *Mother Goose* is, or so they say, the Hamlet of animal roles, introspective and moody as only a costive bird straining over its egg might be. There is a full gamut of emotion in the Goose role -- loyalty and devotion to her mother; joy and delight at her own maternity; heartbreak at loss of egg; fear and trembling at the wide variety of gruesome possibilities which might occur if, in the infinite intercouplings of possible texts which occur all the time in the promiscuity of Pantoland, one story effortlessly segues into another story, so that *Mother Goose* twins up with *Jack and the Beanstalk*, involving an egg-hungry ogre, or with *Robin Hood,* incorporating a goose-hungry Sheriff of Nottingham. Note that the Goose, like the Dame, is a female role usually, though not always, played by a man. But the Goose does not represent the exaggerated and parodic femininity of Widow Twankey. The Goose's femininity is real. She is all woman. Witness the centrality of the egg in her life. So the Goose deserves an interpreter with the sophisticated technique and empathy for gender of the *onnagata,* the female impersonators of the Japanese Kabuki theatre, who can make you weep at the sadness inherent in the sleeves of a kimono as they quiver with suppressed emotion at a woman's lot.

Because of this, and because she is the prime focus of all attention, the Goose in *Mother Goose* is the premier animal role, even more so than. . .

2 *Dick Whittington's Cat:* Dick Whittington's cat is the Scaramouche of Pantoland, limber, agile, and going on two legs more often than on four to stress his status as intermediary between the world of the animals and our world. If he possesses some of the chthonic ambiguity of all dark messengers between different modes of being, nevertheless he is never less than a perfect valet to his master and hops and skips at Dick's bidding. His is therefore less of a starring role than the Goose, even if his rat-catching activities are central to the action and it is a difficult to imagine Dick without his cat as Morecambe without Wise.

Note that this cat is male almost to a fault, unquestionably a tom-cat, and personated by a man; some things are sacrosanct, even in Pantoland. A tom-cat is maleness personified, whereas. . .

3 *Daisy the Cow* is so female it takes two whole men to represent her, one on his own couldn't hack it. The back legs of the pantomime quadruped are traditionally a thankless task, but the front end gets the chance to indulge in all manner of antics, flirting, flattering, fluttering those endless eyelashes and, sometimes, if the coordination between the two ends is good enough, Daisy does a tap-dance, which makes her massive udder with its many dangling teats dip and sway in the most salacious manner, bringing back home the notion of a basic crudely reproductive female sexuality of which those of us who don't lactate often do not like to be reminded. (They have lactation, generation all the time in mind in Pantoland.)

This rude femaleness requires two men to mimic it, as I've said; therefore you could call Daisy a Dame, squared.

These three are the principal animal leads in Pantoland, although Mother Hubbard, a free-floating Dame who might turn up in any text, always comes accompanied by her dog but, more often than not, Chuckles gets in on the act here, and *real* animals don't count. Pantomime horses can crop up anywhere and mimic rats are not confined to *Dick Whittington* but inhabit Cinderella's kitchen, even drive her coach; there are mice and lizards too. Birds. You need robins to cover up the Babes in the Wood. Emus, you get sometimes. Ducks. You name it.

When Pantoland was young, and I mean *really* young, before it got stage-struck, in the time of the sky wolf, when fertility festivals filled up those vacant, dark, solstitial days, we used to see no difference between ourselves and the animals. Bruno the Bear and Felix the Cat walked and talked amongst us. We lived with, we loved, we married the animals *(Beauty and the Beast).* The Goose, the Cat and Daisy the Cow have come to us out of the paradise that little children remember, when we thought we could talk to the animals, to remind us how once we knew that the animals were just as human as we were, and that made us more human too.

THE PRINCIPAL BOY

What an armful! She is the grandest thing in Pantoland.

Look at those arms! Look at those thighs! Like tree trunks, but like sexy tree trunks. Her hats are huge and plumed with feathers; her gleaming, exiguous little knicks are made of satin and trimmed with sequins. As Prince Charming, she is a veritable spectacle of pure glamour although, as Jack, her costume might start off a touch more pleasant and, as Dick, she needs to look like a London apprentice for a while before she gets to try on that Lord Mayor schmutter. For Robin Hood, she'll wear green; as Aladdin, the East is signified by her turban.

You can tell she is supposed to be a man not by her shape, which is a conventional hour-glass, but by her body language. She marches with as martial a stride as it is possible to achieve in stiletto heels and throws out her arms in wide, generous, all-encompassing, patriarchal gestures, as if she owned the earth. Her maleness has an antique charm, even, nowadays, a touch of wistful Edwardiana about it; no Principal Boy worth her salt would want to personate a New Man, after all. She's gone to the bother of turning herself into a Principal Boy to get away from the washing-up, in the first place.

In spite of her spilling physical luxuriance, which ensures that, unlike the more ambivalent Dame, the Principal Boy is always referred to as a "she", her voice is a deep, dark brown and, when raised in song, could raise the dead. Who, who ever heard her, could ever forget a Principal Boy of the Old School leading the chorus in a rousing military parade and rendition of, say, "Where are the boys of the Old Brigade?"

Come to that, where *are* the Principal Boys of the Old Brigade? In these anorexic times, there is less and less thigh to slap. Girls, nowadays, are big-bosomed, all right, due to implants, but not deep-chested any more. Principal Boys used to share a hollow-voiced, bass-baritone bonhomie with department-store Father Christmases but "Ho! ho! ho!" is heard no more in the land. In these lean times, your average Principal Boy looks more like a Peter Pan, and pre-pubescence isn't what you're aiming for at a fertility festival, although the presence of actual children, in great numbers, laughing at that which they should not know about, is indispensable as having established the success of preceding fertility festivals.

The Principal Boy is a male/female cross, like the Dame, but she is never played for laughs. No. She is played for thrills, for adventure, the romance. So, after innumerable adventures, she ends up with the Principal Girl in a number where their voices soar and swoon together as in the excruciatingly erotic climactic aria of Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppaea*, performed as it is in the present day always by two ladies, one playing Nero, one Poppaea, due to male castrati being thin on the ground in spite of the population explosion. And, as Principal Boy and Principal Girl duet, their four breasts in two décolletages jostle one another for pre-eminence in the eyes of all observers. This is a thrill indeed but will not make babies unless they then dash out and borrow the turkey-baster from the Christmas-dinner kitchen. There is a kind of censorship inherent in the pantomime.

But the question of gender remains vague because you have to hang on to the idea that the Principal Boy is all boy and all girl *at the same time*, a door that opens both ways, just as the Dame is Mother Eve and Old Adam in one parcel; they are both doors that open both ways, they are the Janus faces of the season, they look backwards and forwards, they bury the past, they procreate the future, and, by rights, these two should belong together for they are and are not ambivalent and the Principal Girl (q. does *not* v. in this work of reference) is nothing more than a pretty prop, even when eponymous as in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*.

Widow Twankey came out of retirement and, gorged on anthropology, dropped down on stage in Pantoland.

"I have come back to earth and I feel randy!"

She/he didn't have to say a word. The decor picked up on her unutterance and all the pasteboard everywhere shuddered.

The Dame and the Principal Boy come together by chance in the Chinese laundry. Aladdin has brought in his washing. They exchange some banter about smalls and drawers, eyeing one another up. They know that this time, for the first time since censorship began, the script will change.

"I feel randy," said Widow Twankey.

What is a fertility festival without a ritual copulation?

But it isn't as simple as that. For now, oh! now the hobby-horse is quite forgot. The Phallic Mother and the Big-Breasted Boy must take second place in the contemporary cast-list to some cricketer who does not

even know enough to make an obscene gesture with his bat, since, in the late twentieth century, the planet is over-populated and four breasts in harmony is what we need more of, rather than babies, so Widow Twankey ought to go and have it off with Mother Hubbard and stop bothering Aladdin, really she/he ought.

Do people still believe in Pantoland?

If you believe in Pantoland, put your palms together and give a big hand to. . .

If you *really* believe in Pantoland, put your -- pardon me, vicar --

A fertility festival without a ritual copulation is. . . nothing but a pantomime.

Widow Twankey has come back to earth to restore the pantomime to its original condition.

But, before scarlet drawers and satin knicks could hit the floor, a hook dropped out of the flies and struck Widow Twankey between the shoulders. The hook lodged securely in her red satin bustier; shouting and screaming, with a great display of scrawny shin, she was hauled back up where she had come from, in spite of her raucous protests, and deposited back amongst the dead stars, leaving the Principal Boy at a loss for what to do except to briskly imitate George Formby and start to sing "Oh, Mr Wu, I'm telling you. . ."

As Umberto Eco once said, "An everlasting carnival does not work." You can't keep it up, you know; nobody ever could. The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment. . . after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened.

Things don't change because a girl puts on trousers or a chap slips on a frock, you know. Masters were masters again the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind. . .

Besides, all that was years ago, of course. That was before television.

Ashputtle

or *The Mother's Ghost*

THREE VERSIONS OF ONE STORY

I THE MUTILATED GIRLS

But although you could easily take the story away from Ashputtle and centre it on the mutilated sisters -- indeed, it would be easy to think of it as a story about cutting bits off women, so that they *will fit in*, some sort of circumcision-like ritual chop, nevertheless, the story always begins not with Ashputtle or her stepsisters but with Ashputtle's mother, as though it is really always the story of her mother even if, at the beginning of the story, the mother herself is just about to exit the narrative because she is at death's door: "A rich man's wife fell sick, and, feeling that her end was near, she called her only daughter to her bedside."

Note the absence of the husband/father. Although the woman is defined by her relation to him ("a rich man's wife") the daughter is unambiguously hers, as if hers alone, and the entire drama concerns only women, takes place almost exclusively among women, is a fight between two groups of women -- in the right-hand corner, Ashputtle and her mother; in the left-hand corner, the stepmother and *her* daughters, of whom the father is unacknowledged but all the same is predicated by both textual and biological necessity.

In the drama between two female families in opposition to one another because of their rivalry over men (husband/father, husband/son), the men seem no more than passive victims of their fancy, yet their significance is absolute because it is ("a rich man", "a king's son") economic.

Ashputtle's father, the old man, is the first object of their desire and their dissension; the stepmother snatches him from the dead mother before her corpse is cold, as soon as her grip loosens. Then there is the young man, the potential bridegroom, the hypothetical son-in-law, for whose possession the mothers fight, using their daughters as instruments of war or as surrogates in the business of mating.

If the men, and the bank balances for which they stand, are the passive victims of the two grown women, then the girls, all three, are animated solely by the wills of their mothers, Even if Ashputtle's mother dies at the beginning of the story, her status as one of the dead only makes her position more authoritative. The mother's ghost dominates the narrative and is, in a real sense, the motive centre, the event that makes all the other events happen.

On her death bed, the mother assures the daughter: "I shall always look after you and always be with you." The story tells you how she does it.

At this point, when her mother makes her promise, Ashputtle is nameless. She is her mother's daughter. That is all we know. It is the stepmother who names her Ashputtle, as a joke, and, in doing so, wipes out her real name, whatever that is, banishes her from the family, exiles her from the shared table to the lonely hearth among the cinders, removes her contingent but honourable status as daughter and gives her, instead, the contingent but disreputable status of servant.

Her mother told Ashputtle she would always look after her, but then she died and the father married again and gave Ashputtle an imitation mother with daughters of her own whom she loves with the same fierce passion as Ashputtle's mother did and still, posthumously, does, as we shall find out.

With the second marriage comes the vexed question: who shall be the daughters of the house? Mine! declares the stepmother and sets the freshly named, non-daughter Ashputtle to sweep and scrub and sleep on the hearth while her daughters lie between clean sheets in Ashputtle's bed. Ashputtle, no longer known as the daughter of her mother, nor of her father either, goes by a dry, dirty, cindery nickname for everything has turned to dust and ashes.

Meanwhile, the false mother sleeps on the bed where the real mother died and is, presumably, pleasured by the husband/father in that

bed, unless there is no pleasure in it for her. We are not told what the husband/ father does as regards domestic or marital function, but we can surely make the assumption that he and the stepmother share a bed, because that is what married people do.

And what can the real mother/wife do about it? Burn as she might with love, anger and jealousy, she is dead and buried.

The father, in this story, is a mystery to me. Is he so besotted with his new wife that he cannot see how his daughter is soiled with kitchen refuse and filthy from her ashy bed and always hard at work? If he sensed there was a drama in hand, he was content to leave the entire production to the women for, absent as he might be, always remember that it is in *his* house where Ashputtle sleeps on the cinders, and he is the invisible link that binds both sets of mothers and daughters in their violent equation. He is the unmoved mover, the unseen organising principle, like God, and, like God, up he pops in person, one fine day, to introduce the essential plot device.

Besides, without the absent father there would be no story because there would have been no conflict.

If they had been able to put aside their differences and discuss everything amicably, they'd have combined to expel the father. Then all the women could have slept in one bed. If they'd kept the father on, he could have done the housework.

This is the essential plot device introduced by the father: he says, "I am about to take a business trip. What presents would my three girls like me to bring back for them?"

Note that: his *three* girls.

It occurs to me that perhaps the stepmother's daughters were really, all the time, his own daughters, just as much his own daughters as Ashputtle, his "natural" daughters, as they say, as though there is something inherently unnatural about legitimacy. *That* would realign the forces in the story. It would make his connivance with the ascendancy of the other girls more plausible. It would make the speedy marriage, the stepmother's hostility, more probable.

But it would also transform the story into something else, because it would provide motivation, and so on; it would mean I'd have to provide a past for all these people, that I would have to equip them with three dimensions, with tastes and memories, and I would have to think of things

for them to eat and wear and say. It would transform "Ashputtle" from the bare necessity of fairy tale, with its characteristic copula formula, "and then", to the emotional and technical complexity of bourgeois realism. They would have to learn to think. Everything would change.

I will stick with what I know.

What presents do his three girls want?

"Bring me a silk dress," said his eldest girl. "Bring me a string of pearls," said the middle one. What about the third one, the forgotten one, called out of the kitchen on a charitable impulse and drying her hands, raw with housework, on her apron, bringing with her the smell of old fire?

"Bring me the first branch that knocks against your hat on the way home," said Ashputtle.

Why did she ask for that? Did she make an informed guess at how little he valued her? Or had a dream told her to use this random formula of unacknowledged desire, to allow blind chance to choose her present for her? Unless it was her mother's ghost, awake and restlessly looking for a way home, that came into the girl's mouth and spoke the request for her.

He brought her back a hazel twig. She planted it on her mother's grave and watered it with tears. It grew into a hazel tree. When Ashputtle came out to weep upon her mother's grave, the turtle dove crooned: "I'll never leave you, I'll always protect you."

Then Ashputtle knew that the turtle dove was her mother's ghost and she herself was still her mother's daughter, and although she had wept and wailed and longed to have her mother back again, now her heart sank a little to find out that her mother, though dead, was no longer gone and henceforward she must do her mother's bidding.

Came the time for that curious fair they used to hold in that country, when all the resident virgins went to dance in front of the king's son so that he could pick out the girl he wanted to marry.

The turtle dove was mad for that, for her daughter to marry the prince. You might have thought her own experience of marriage might have taught her to be wary, but no, needs must, what else is a girl to do? The turtle dove was mad for her daughter to marry so she flew in and picked up the new silk dress with her beak, dragged it to the open window, threw it down to Ashputtle. She did the same with the string of pearls. Ashputtle had a good wash under the pump in the yard, put on her stolen

finery and crept out the back way, secretly, to the dancing grounds, but the stepsisters had to stay home and sulk because they had nothing to wear.

The turtle dove stayed close to Ashputtle, pecking her ears to make her dance vivaciously, so that the prince would see her, so that the prince would love her, so that he would follow her and find the clue of the fallen slipper, for the story is not complete without the ritual humiliation of the other woman and the mutilation of her daughters.

The search for the foot that fits the slipper is essential to the enactment of this ritual humiliation.

The other woman wants that young man desperately. She would do anything to catch him. Not losing a daughter, but gaining a son. She wants a son so badly she is prepared to cripple her daughters. She takes up a carving knife and chops off her elder daughter's big toe, so that her foot will fit the little shoe.

Imagine.

Brandishing the carving knife, the woman bears down on her child, who is as distraught as if she had not been a girl but a boy and the old woman was after a more essential portion than a toe. "No!" she screams. "Mother! No! Not the knife! No!" But off it comes, all the same, and she throws it in the fire, among the ashes, where Ashputtle finds it, wonders at it, and feels both awe and fear at the phenomenon of mother love.

Mother love, which winds about these daughters like a shroud.

The prince saw nothing familiar in the face of the tearful young woman, one shoe off, one shoe on, displayed to him in triumph by her mother, but he said: "I promised I would marry whoever the shoe fitted so I will marry you," and they rode off together.

The turtle dove came flying round and did not croon or coo to the bridal pair but sang a horrid song: "Look! Look! There's blood in the shoe!"

The prince returned the ersatz ex-fiancee at once, angry at the trick, but the stepmother hastily lopped off her other daughter's heel and pushed *that* poor foot into the bloody shoe as soon as it was vacant so, nothing for it, a man of his word, the prince helped up the new girl and once again he rode away.

Back came the nagging turtle dove: "Look!" And, sure enough, the shoe was full of blood again.

"Let Ashputtle try," said the eager turtle dove.

So now Ashputtle must put her foot into the hideous receptacle, this open wound, still slick and warm as it is, for nothing in any of the many texts of this tale suggests the prince washed the shoe out between the fittings. It was an ordeal in itself to put a naked foot into the bloody shoe, but her mother, the turtle dove, urged her to do so in a soft, cooing croon that could not be denied.

If she does not plunge without revulsion into this open wound, she won't be fit to marry. That is the song of the turtle dove, while the other mad mother stood impotently by.

Ashputtle's foot, the size of the bound foot of a Chinese woman, a stump. Almost an amputee already, she put her tiny foot in it.

"Look! Look!" cried the turtle dove in triumph, even while the bird betrayed its ghostly nature by becoming progressively more and more immaterial as Ashputtle stood up in the shoe and commenced to walk around. Squelch, went the stump of the foot in the shoe. Squelch. "Look!" sang out the turtle dove. "Her foot fits the shoe like a corpse fits the coffin!

"See how well I look after you, my darling!"

2 THE BURNED CHILD

A burned child lived in the ashes. No, not really burned -- more charred, a little bit charred, like a stick half-burned and picked off the fire. She looked like charcoal and ashes because she lived in the ashes since her mother died and the hot ashes burned her so she was scabbed and scarred. The burned child lived on the hearth, covered in ashes, as if she were still mourning.

After her mother died and was buried, her father forgot the mother and forgot the child and married the woman who used to rake the ashes, and that was why the child lived in the unraked ashes, and there was nobody to brush her hair, so it stuck out like a mat, nor to wipe the dirt off her scabbed face, and she had no heart to do it for herself, but she raked the ashes and slept beside the little cat and got the burned bits from the bottom of the pot to eat, scraping them out, squatting on the floor, by

herself in front of the fire, not as if she were human, because she was still mourning.

Her mother was dead and buried, but felt perfect exquisite pain of love when she looked up through the earth and saw the burned child covered in ashes.

"Milk the cow, burned child, and bring back all the milk," said the stepmother, who used to rake the ashes and milk the cow, once upon a time, but the burned child did all that, now.

The ghost of the mother went into the cow.

"Drink milk, grow fat," said the mother's ghost.

The burned child pulled on the udder and drank enough milk before she took the bucket back and nobody saw, and time passed, she drank milk every day, she grew fat, she grew breasts, she grew up.

There was a man the stepmother wanted and she asked him into the kitchen to get his dinner, but she made the burned child cook it, although the stepmother did all the cooking before. After the burned child cooked the dinner the stepmother sent her off to milk the cow.

"I want that man for myself," said the burned child to the cow.

The cow let down more milk, and more, and more, enough for the girl to have a drink and wash her face and wash her hands. When she washed her face, she washed the scabs off and now she was not burned at all, but the cow was empty.

"Give your own milk, next time," said the ghost of the mother inside the cow. "You've milked me dry."

The little cat came by. The ghost of the mother went into the cat.

"Your hair wants doing," said the cat. "Lie down."

The little cat unpicked her raggy lugs with its clever paws until the burned child's hair hung down nicely, but it had been so snagged and tangled that the cat's claws were all pulled out before it was finished.

"Comb your own hair, next time," said the cat. "You've maimed me."

The burned child was clean and combed, but stark naked.

There was a bird sitting in the apple tree. The ghost of the mother left the cat and went into the bird. The bird struck its own breast with its beak. Blood poured down on to the burned child under the tree. It ran over her shoulders and covered her front and covered her back. When the bird had no more blood, the burned child got a red silk dress.

"Make your own dress, next time," said the bird. "I"m through with that bloody business."

The burned child went into the kitchen to show herself to the man. She was not burned any more, but lovely. The man left off looking at the stepmother and looked at the girl.

"Come home with me and let your stepmother stay and rake the ashes," he said to her and off they went. He gave her a house and money. She did all right.

"Now I can go to sleep," said the ghost of the mother. "Now everything is all right."

3 TRAVELLING CLOTHES

The stepmother took the red-hot poker and burned the orphan's face with it because she had not raked the ashes. The girl went to her mother's grave. In the earth her mother said: "It must be raining. Or else it is snowing. Unless there is a heavy dew tonight."

"It isn't raining, it isn't snowing, it's too early for the dew. My tears are falling on your grave, mother."

The dead woman waited until night came. Then she climbed out and went to the house. The stepmother slept on a feather bed, but the burned child slept on the hearth among the ashes. When the dead woman kissed her, the scar vanished. The girl woke up. The dead woman gave her a red dress.

"I had it when I was your age."

The girl put the red dress on. The dead woman took worms from her eyesockets; they turned into jewels. The girl put on a diamond ring.

"I had it when I was your age."

They went together to the grave.

"Step into my coffin."

"No," said the girl. She shuddered.

"I stepped into *my* mother's coffin when I was your age."

The girl stepped into the coffin although she thought it would be the death of her. It turned into a coach and horses. The horses stamped, eager to be gone.

"Go and seek your fortune, darling."

Alice in Prague

or *The Curious Room*

This piece was written in praise of Jan Svankmayer,
the animator of Prague, and his film of *Alice*

In the city of Prague, once, it was winter.

Outside the curious room, there is a sign on the door which says "Forbidden". Inside, inside, oh, come and see! The celebrated DR DEE.

The celebrated Dr Dee, looking for all the world like Santa Claus on account of his long, white beard and apple cheeks, is contemplating his crystal, the fearful sphere that contains everything that is, or was, or ever shall be.

It is a round ball of solid glass and gives a deceptive impression of weightlessness, because you can see right through it and we falsely assume an equation between lightness and transparency, that what the light shines through cannot be there and so must weigh nothing. In fact, the Doctor's crystal ball is heavy enough to inflict a substantial injury and the Doctor's assistant, Ned Kelly, the Man in the Iron Mask, often weighs the ball in one hand or tosses it back and forth from one to the other hand as he ponders the fragility of the hollow bone, his master's skull, as it pores heedless over some tome.

Ned Kelly would blame the murder on the angels. He would say the angels came out of the sphere. Everybody knows the angels live there.

The crystal resembles: an aqueous humour, frozen:

> a glass eye, although without any iris or pupil -- just the sort of transparent eye, in fact, which the adept might construe as apt to see the invisible;

a tear, round, as it forms within the eye, for
a tear acquires its characteristic shape of a
pear, what we think of as a "tear" shape, only
in the act of falling;

the shining drop that trembles, sometimes, on the
tip of the Doctor's well-nigh senescent, tending
towards the flaccid, yet nevertheless sustainable
and discernible morning erection, and
always reminds him of

a drop of dew,

a drop of dew endlessly, tremulously about to fall
from the unfolded petals of a rose and, therefore,
like the tear, retaining the perfection of its
circumference only by refusing to sustain free fall,
remaining what it is, because it refuses to become
what it might be, the antithesis of metamorphosis;

and yet, in old England, far away, the sign of the
Do Drop Inn will always, that jovial pun, show an
oblate spheroid, heavily tinselled, because the
sign-painter, in order to demonstrate the idea of
"drop", needs must represent the dew in the act of
falling and therefore, for the purposes of this
comparison, *not* resembling the numinous ball
weighing down the angelic Doctor's outstretched
palm.

For Dr Dee, the invisible is only another unexplored country, a brave new world.

The hinge of the sixteenth century, where it joins with the seventeenth century, is as creaky and judders open as reluctantly as the door in a haunted house. Through that door, in the distance, we may

glimpse the distant light of the Age of Reason, but precious little of that is about to fall on Prague, the capital of paranoia, where the fortune-tellers live on Golden Alley in cottages so small, a good-sized doll would find itself cramped, and there is one certain house on Alchemist's Street that only becomes visible during a thick fog. (On sunny days, you see a stone.) But, even in the fog, only those born on the Sabbath can see the house anyway.

Like a lamp guttering out in a recently vacated room, the Renaissance flared, faded and extinguished itself. The world had suddenly revealed itself as bewilderingly infinite, but since the imagination remained, for after all it is only human, finite, our imaginations took some time to catch up. If Francis Bacon will die in 1626 a martyr to experimental science, having contracted a chill whilst stuffing a dead hen with snow on Highgate Hill to see if that would keep it fresh, in Prague, where Dr Faustus once lodged in Charles Square, Dr Dee, the English expatriate alchemist, awaits the manifestation of the angel in the Archduke Rudolph's curious room, and we are still fumbling our way towards the end of the previous century.

The Archduke Rudolph keeps his priceless collection of treasures in this curious room; he numbers the Doctor amongst these treasures and is therefore forced to number the Doctor's assistant, the unspeakable and iron-visaged Kelly, too.

The Archduke Rudolph has crazy eyes. These eyes are the mirrors of his soul.

It is very cold this afternoon, the kind of weather that makes a person piss. The moon is up already, a moon the colour of candlewax and, as the sky discolours when the night conies on, the moon grows more white, more cold, white as the source of all the cold in the world, until, when the winter moon reaches its chill meridian, everything will freeze -- not only the water in the jug and the ink in the well, but the blood in the vein, the aqueous humour.

Metamorphosis.

In their higgledy-piggledy disorder, the twigs on the bare trees outside the thick window resemble those random scratchings made by common use that you only see when you lift your wineglass up to the light.

A hard frost has crisped the surface of the deep snow on the Archduke's tumbled roofs and turrets. In the snow, a raven: caw!

Dr Dee knows the language of birds and sometimes speaks it, but what the birds say is frequently banal; all the raven said, over and over, was: "Poor Tom's a-cold!"

Above the Doctor's head, slung from the low-beamed ceiling, dangles a flying turtle, stuffed. In the dim room we can make out, amongst much else, the random juxtaposition of an umbrella, a sewing machine and a dissecting table; a raven and a writing desk; an aged mermaid, poor wizened creature, cramped in a foetal position in ajar, her ream of grey hair suspended adrift in the viscous liquid that preserves her, her features rendered greenish and somewhat distorted by the flaws in the glass.

Dr Dee would like, for a mate to this mermaid, to keep in a cage, if alive, or, if dead, in a stoppered bottle, an angel.

It was an age in love with wonders.

Dr Dee's assistant, Ned Kelly, the Man in the Iron Mask, is also looking for angels. He is gazing at the sheeny, reflective screen of his scrying disc which is made of polished coal. The angels visit him more frequently than they do the Doctor, but, for some reason, Dr Dee cannot see Kelly's guests, although they crowd the surface of the scrying disc, crying out in their high, piercing voices in the species of bird-creole with which they communicate. It is a great sadness to him.

Kelly, however, is phenomenally gifted in this direction and notes down on a pad the intonations of their speech which, though he doesn't understand it himself, the Doctor excitedly makes sense of.

But, today, no go.

Kelly yawns. He stretches. He feels the pressure of the weather on his bladder.

The privy at the top of the tower is a hole in the floor behind a cupboard door. It is situated above another privy, with another hole, above another privy, another hole, and so on, down seven further privies, seven more holes, until your excreta at last hurtles into the cesspit far below. The cold keeps the smell down, thank God.

Dr Dee, ever the seeker after knowledge, has calculated the velocity of a flying turd.

Although a man could hang himself in the privy with ease and comfort, securing the rope about the beam above and launching himself into the void to let gravity break his neck for him, Kelly, whether at stool or making water, never allows the privy to remind him of the "long drop" nor even, however briefly, admires his own instrument for fear the phrase "well-hung" recalls the noose which he narrowly escaped in his native England for fraud, once, in Lancaster; for forgery, once, in Rutlandshire; and for performing a confidence trick in Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

But his ears were cropped for him in the pillory at Walton-le-Dale, after he dug up a corpse from a churchyard for purposes of necromancy, or possibly of grave-robbing, and this is why, in order to conceal this amputation, he always wears the iron mask modelled after that which will be worn by a namesake three hundred years hence in a country that does not yet exist, an iron mask like an upturned bucket with a slit cut for his eyes.

Kelly, unbuttoning, wonders if his piss will freeze in the act of falling; if, today, it is cold enough in Prague to let him piss an arc of ice.

No.

He buttons up again.

Women loathe this privy. Happily, few venture here, into the magician's tower, where the Archduke Rudolph keeps his collection of wonders, his proto-museum, his "*Wunderkammer*", his *"cabinet de curiosites"*, that *curious room* of which we speak.

There's a theory, one I find persuasive, that the quest for knowledge is, at bottom, the search for the answer to the question: "Where was I before I was born?"

In the beginning was. . . what?

Perhaps, in the beginning, there was a curious room, a room like this one, crammed with wonders; and now the room and all it contains are forbidden you, although it was made just for you, had been prepared for you since time began, and you will spend all your life trying to remember it.

Kelly once took the Archduke aside and offered him, at a price, a little piece of the beginning, a slice of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil itself, which Kelly claimed he had obtained

from an Armenian, who had found it on Mount Ararat, growing in the shadows of the wreck of the Ark. The slice had dried out with time and looked very much like a dehydrated ear.

The Archduke soon decided it was a fake, that Kelly had been fooled. The Archduke is *not* gullible. Rather, he has a boundless desire to know *everything* and an exceptional generosity of belief. At night, he stands on top of the tower and watches the stars in the company of Tycho Brahe and Johann Kepler, yet by day, he makes no move nor judgement before he consults the astrologers in their zodiacal hats and yet, in those days, either an astrologer or an astronomer would be hard put to it to describe the difference between their disciplines.

He is not gullible. But he has his peculiarities.

The Archduke keeps a lion chained up in his bedroom as a species of watch-dog or, since the lion is a member of the *Felis* family and not a member of the *Cave canem* family, a giant guard-cat. For fear of the lion's yellow teeth, the Archduke had them pulled. Now that the poor beast cannot chew, he must subsist on slop. The lion lies with his head on his paws, dreaming. If you could open up his brain this moment, you would find nothing there but the image of a beefsteak.

Meanwhile, the Archduke, in the curtained privacy of his bed, embraces something, God knows what.

Whatever it is, he does it with such energy that the bell hanging over the bed becomes agitated due to the jolting and rhythmic lurching of the bed, and the clapper jangles against the sides.

Ting-a-ling!

The bell is cast out of *electrum magicum.* Paracelsus said that a bell cast out of *electrum magicum* would summon up the spirits. If a rat gnaws the Archduke's toe during the night, his involuntary start will agitate the bell immediately so the spirits can come and chase the rat away, for the lion, although *sui generis* a cat, is not sufficiently a cat in spirit to perform the domestic functions of a common mouser, not like the little calico beastie who keeps the good Doctor company and often, out of pure affection, brings him furry tributes of those she has slain.

Though the bell rings, softly at first, and then with increasing fury as the Archduke nears the end of his journey, no spirits come. But there have been no rats either.

A split fig falls out of the bed on to the marble floor with a soft, exhausted plop, followed by a hand of bananas, that spread out and go limp, as if in submission.

"Why can't he make do with meat, like other people," whined the hungry lion.

Can the Archduke be effecting intercourse with a fruit salad?

Or with Carmen Miranda's hat?

Worse.

The hand of bananas indicates the Archduke's enthusiasm for the newly discovered Americas. Oh, brave new world! There is a street in Prague called "New World" *(Novy Svei).* The hand of bananas is freshly arrived from Bermuda via his Spanish kin, who know what he likes. He has a particular enthusiasm for weird plants, and every week comes to converse with his mandrakes, those warty, shaggy roots that originate (the Archduke shudders pleasurably to think about it) in the sperm and water spilled by a hanged man.

The mandrakes live at ease in a special cabinet. It falls to Ned Kelly's reluctant duty to bathe each of these roots once a week in milk and dress them up in fresh linen nightgowns. Kelly, reluctantly, since the roots, warts and all, resemble so many virile members, and he does not like to handle them, imagining they raucously mock his manhood as he tends them, believing they unman him.

The Archduke's collection also boasts some magnificent specimens of the *coco-de-mer,* or double coconut, which grows in the shape, but exactly the shape, of the pelvic area of a woman, a foot long, heft and clefted, I kid you not. The Archduke and his gardeners plan to effect a vegetable marriage and will raise the progeny -- *man-de-mer* or *coco-drake* -- in his own greenhouses. (The Archduke himself is a confirmed bachelor.)

The bell ceases. The lion sighs with relief and lays his head once more upon his heavy paws: "Now I can sleep!"

Then, from under the bed curtains, on either side of the bed, begins to pour a veritable torrent that quickly forms into dark, viscous, livid puddles on the floor.

But, before you accuse the Archduke of the unspeakable, dip your finger in the puddle and lick it.

Delicious!

For these are sticky puddles of freshly squeezed grape juice, and apple juice, and peach juice, juice of plum, pear, or raspberry, strawberry, cherry ripe, blackberry, black currant, white currant, red. . . The room brims with the delicious ripe scent of summer pudding, even though, outside, on the frozen tower, the raven still creaks out his melancholy call:

"Poor Tom's a-cold!"

And it is midwinter.

Night was. Widow Night, an old woman in mourning, with big, black wings, came beating against the window; they kept her out with lamps and candles.

When he went back into the laboratory, Ned Kelly found that Dr Dee had nodded off to sleep as the old man often did nowadays towards the end of the day, the crystal ball having rolled from palm to lap as he lay back in the black oak chair, and now, as he shifted at the impulse of a dream, it rolled again off his lap, down on to the floor, where it landed with a soft thump on the rushes -- no harm done -- and the little calico cat disabled it at once with a swift blow of her right paw, then began to play with it, batting it that way and this before she administered the *coup de grace.*

With a gusty sigh, Kelly once more addressed his scrying disc, although today he felt barren of invention. He reflected ironically that, if just so much as one wee feathery angel ever, even the one time, should escape the scrying disc and flutter into the laboratory, the cat would surely get it.

Not, Kelly knew, that such a thing was possible.

If you could see inside Kelly's brain, you would discover a calculating machine.

Widow Night painted the windows black.

Then, all at once, the cat made a noise like sharply crumpled paper, a noise of inquiry and concern. A rat? Kelly turned to look. The cat, head on one side, was considering, with such scrupulous intensity that its

prickled ears met at the tips, something lying on the floor beside the crystal ball, so that at first it looked as if the glass eye had shed a tear.

But look again.

Kelly looked again and began to sob and gibber.

The cat rose up and backed away all in one liquid motion, hissing, its bristling tail stuck straight up, stiff as a broom handle, too scared to permit even the impulse of attack upon the creature, about the size of a little finger, that popped out of the crystal ball as if the ball had been a bubble.

But its passage has not cracked or fissured the ball; it is still whole, has sealed itself up again directly after the departure of the infinitesimal child who, suddenly released from her sudden confinement, now experimentally stretches out her tiny limbs to test the limit of the new invisible circumference around her.

Kelly stammered: "There must be some rational explanation!"

Although they were too small for him to see them, her teeth still had the transparency and notched edges of the first stage of the second set; her straight, fair hair was cut in a stern fringe; she scowled and sat upright, looking about her with evident disapproval.

The cat, cowering ecstatically, now knocked over an alembic and a quantity of *elixir vitae* ran away through the rushes. At the bang, the Doctor woke and was not astonished to see her.

He bade her a graceful welcome in the language of the tawny pippit.

How did she get there?

She was kneeling on the mantelpiece of the sitting room of the place she lived, looking at herself in the mirror. Bored, she breathed on the glass until it clouded over and then, with her finger, she drew a door. The door opened. She sprang through and, after a brief moment's confusing fish-eye view of a vast, gloomy chamber, scarcely illuminated by five candles in one branched stick and filled with all the clutter in the world, her view was obliterated by the clawed paw of a vast cat extended ready to strike, hideously increasing in size as it approached her, and then, splat! she burst out of "time will be" into "time was", for the transparent substance which surrounded her burst like a bubble and there she was, in

her pink frock, lying on some rushes under the gaze of a tender ancient with a long, white beard and a man with a coal-scuttle on his head.

Her lips moved but no sound came out; she had left her voice behind in the mirror. She flew into a tantrum and beat her heels upon the floor, weeping furiously. The Doctor, who, in some remote time past, raised children of his own, let her alone until, her passion spent, she heaved and grunted on the rushes, knuckling her eyes; then he peered into the depths of a big china bowl on a dim shelf and produced from out of it a strawberry.

The child accepted the strawberry suspiciously, for it was, although not large, the size of her head. She sniffed it, turned it round and round, and then essayed just one little bite out of it, leaving behind a tiny ring of white within the crimson flesh. Her teeth were perfect.

At the first bite, she grew a little.

Kelly continued to mumble: "There must be some rational explanation."

The child took a second, less tentative bite, and grew a little more. The mandrakes in their white nightgowns woke up and began to mutter among themselves.

Reassured at last, she gobbled the strawberry all up, but she had been falsely reassured; now her flaxen crown bumped abruptly against the rafters, out of the range of the candlestick so they could not see her face but a gigantic tear splashed with a metallic clang upon Ned Kelly's helmet, then another, and the Doctor, with some presence of mind, before they needed to hurriedly construct an Ark, pressed a phial of *elixir vitae* into her hand. When she drank it, she shrank down again until soon she was small enough to sit on his knee, her blue eyes staring with wonder at his beard, as white as ice-cream and as long as Sunday.

But she had no wings.

Kelly, the faker, knew there *must* be a rational explanation but he could not think of one.

She found her voice at last.

"Tell me," she said, "the answer to this problem: the Governor of Kgoujni wants to give a very small dinner party, and invites his father's brother-in-law, his brother's father-in-law, his father-in-law's brother, and his brother-in-law's father. Find the number of guests."1

At the sound of her voice, which was as clear as a looking-glass, everything in the curious room gave a shake and a shudder and, for a moment, looked as if it were painted on gauze, like a theatrical effect, and might disappear if a bright light were shone on it. Dr Dee stroked his beard reflectively. He could provide answers to many questions, or knew where to look for answers. He had gone and caught a falling starre -- didn't a piece of it lie beside the stuffed dodo? To impregnate the aggressively phallic mandrake, with its masculinity to the power of two, as implied by its name, was a task which, he pondered, the omnivorous Archduke, with his enthusiasm for erotic esoterica, might prove capable of. And the answer to the other two imponderables posed by the poet were obtainable, surely, through the intermediary of the angels, if only one scried long enough.

He truly believed that nothing was unknowable. That is what makes him modern.

But, to the child's question, he can imagine no answer.

Kelly, forced against his nature to suspect the presence of another world that would destroy his confidence in tricks, is sunk in introspection, and has not even heard her.

However, such magic as there is in *this* world, as opposed to the worlds that can be made out of dictionaries, can only be real when it is artificial and Dr Dee himself, whilst a member of the Cambridge Footlights at university, before his beard was white or long, directed a famous production of Aristophanes' *Peace* at Trinity College, in which he sent a grocer's boy right up to heaven, laden with his basket as if to make deliveries, on the back of a giant beetle.

Archytas made a flying dove of wood. At Nuremberg, according to Boterus, an adept constructed both an eagle and a fly and set them to flutter and flap across his laboratory, to the astonishment of all. In olden times, the statues that Daedalus built raised their arms and moved their legs due to the action of weights, and of shifting deposits of mercury. Albertus Magnus, the Great Sage, cast a head in brass that spoke.

Are they animate or not, these beings that jerk and shudder into such a semblance of life? Do these creatures believe themselves to be human? And if they do, at what point might they, by virtue of the sheer intensity of their belief, become so?

(In Prague, the city of the Golem, an image can come to life.)

The Doctor thinks about these things a great deal and thinks the child upon his knee, babbling about the inhabitants of another world, must be a little automaton popped up from God knows where.

Meanwhile, the door marked "Forbidden" opened up again.

It came in.

It rolled on little wheels, a wobbling, halting, toppling progress, a clockwork land galleon, tall as a mast, advancing at a stately if erratic pace, nodding and becking and shedding inessential fragments of its surface as it came, its foliage rustling, now stuck and perilously rocking at a crack in the stone floor with which its wheels cannot cope, now flying helter-skelter, almost out of control, wobbling, clicking, whirring, an electric juggernaut evidently almost on the point of collapse; it has been a heavy afternoon.

But, although it looked as if eccentrically self-propelled, Arcimboldo the Milanese pushed it, picking up bits of the thing as they fell off, tut-tutting at its ruination, pushing it, shoving it, occasionally picking it up bodily and carrying it. He was smeared all over with its secretions and looked forward to a good wash once it had been returned to the curious room from whence it came. There, the Doctor and his assistant will take it apart until the next time.

This thing before us, although it is not, was not and never will be alive, *has* been animate and will be animate again, but, at the moment, not, for now, after one final shove, it stuck stock-still, wheels halted, wound down, uttering one last, gross, mechanical sigh.

A nipple dropped off. The Doctor picked it up and offered it to the child. Another strawberry! She shook her head.

The size and prominence of the secondary sexual characteristics indicate this creature is, like the child, of the feminine gender. She lives in the fruit bowl where the Doctor found the first strawberry. When the Archduke wants her, Arcimboldo, who designed her, puts her together again, arranging the fruit of which she is composed on a wicker frame, always a little different from the last time according to what the greenhouse can provide. Today, her hair is largely composed of green muscat grapes, her nose a pear, eyes filbert nuts, cheeks russet apples somewhat wrinkled -- never mind! The Archduke has a penchant for older

women. When the painter got her ready, she looked like Carmen Miranda's hat on wheels, but her name was "Summer".

But now, what devastation! Hair mashed, nose squashed, bosom pureed, belly juiced. The child observed this apparition with the greatest interest. She spoke again. She queried earnestly:

"If 70 per cent have lost an eye, 75 per cent an ear, 80 per cent an arm, 85 per cent a leg: what percentage, *at least,* must have lost all four?"2

Once again, she stumped them. They pondered, all three men, and at last slowly shook their heads. As if the child's question were the last straw, "Summer" now disintegrated -- subsided, slithered, slopped off her frame into her fruit bowl, whilst shed fruit, some almost whole, bounced to the rushes around her. The Milanese, with a pang, watched his design disintegrate.

It is not so much that the Archduke likes to pretend this monstrous being is alive, for nothing inhuman is alien to him; rather, he does not care whether she is alive or no, that what he wants to do is to plunge his member into her artificial strangeness, perhaps as he does so imagining himself an orchard and this embrace, this plunge into the succulent flesh, which is not flesh as we know it, which is, if you like, the living metaphor -- *"fica"* -- explains Arcimboldo, displaying the orifice -- this intercourse with the very flesh of summer will fructify his cold kingdom, the snowy country outside the window, where the creaking raven endlessly laments the inclement weather.

"Reason becomes the enemy which withholds from us so many possibilities of pleasure," said Freud.

One day, when the fish within the river freeze, the day of the frigid lunar noon, the Archduke will come to Dr Dee, his crazy eyes resembling, the one, a blackberry, the other, a cherry, and say: transform me into a harvest festival!

So he did; but the weather got no better.

Peckish, Kelly absently demolished a fallen peach, so lost in thought he never noticed the purple bruise, and the little cat played croquet with the peach stone while Dr Dee, stirred by memories of his English children long ago and far away, stroked the girl's flaxen hair.

"Whither comest thou?" he asked her.

The question stirred her again into speech.

"A and B began the year with only £1,000 apiece," she announced, urgently.

The three men turned to look at her as if she were about to pronounce some piece of oracular wisdom. She tossed her blonde head. She went on.

"They borrowed nought; they stole nought. On the next New Year's Day they had £60,000 between them. How did they do it?"3

They could not think of a reply. They continued to stare at her, words turning to dust in their mouths.

"How did they do it?" she repeated, now almost with desperation, as if, if they only could stumble on the correct reply, she would be precipitated back, diminutive, stern, rational, within the crystal ball and thence be tossed back through the mirror to "time will be", or, even better, to the book from which she had sprung.

"Poor Tom's a-cold," offered the raven. After that, came silence.

NOTE:
The answers to Alice's conundrums:

1 One.

2 Ten.

3 They went that day to the Bank of England. A stood in front of it, while B went round and stood behind it.

Problems and answers from *A Tangled Tale*, Lewis Carroll, London, 1885.

Alice was invented by a logician and therefore she comes from the world of nonsense, that is, from the world of *non-sense* -- the opposite of common sense; this world is constricted by logical deduction and is created by language, although language shivers into abstractions within it.

Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene

For a woman to be a virgin and a mother, you need a miracle; when a woman is not a virgin, nor a mother, either, nobody talks about miracles. Mary, the mother of Jesus, together with the other Mary, the mother of St John, and the Mary Magdalene, the repentant harlot, went down to the seashore; a woman named Fatima, a servant, went with them. They stepped into a boat, they threw away the rudder, they permitted the sea to take them where it wanted. It beached them near Marseilles.

Don't run away with the idea the South of France was an easy option compared to the deserts of Syria, or Egypt, or the wastes of Cappadocia, where other early saints, likewise driven by the imperious need for solitude, found arid, inhospitable crevices in which to contemplate the ineffable. There were clean, square, white, Roman cities all along the Mediterranean coast everywhere except the place the three Marys landed with their servant. They landed in the middle of a malarial swamp, the Camargue. It was not pleasant. The desert would have been more healthy.

But there the two stern mothers and Fatima -- don't forget Fatima -- set up a chapel, at the place we now call Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. There they stayed. But the other Mary, the Magdalene, the not-mother, could not stop. Impelled by the demon of loneliness, she went off on her own through the Camargue; then she crossed limestone hill after limestone hill. Flints cut her feet, sun burned her skin. She ate fruit that had fallen from the tree of its own accord, like a perfect Manichean. She ate dropped berries. The black-browed Palestinian woman walked in silence, gaunt as famine, hairy as a dog.

She walked until she came to the forest of the Sainte-Baume. She walked until she came to the remotest part of the forest. There she found a cave. There she stopped. There she prayed. She did not speak to another human being, she did not see another human being, for thirty-three years. By then, she was old.

Mary Magdalene, the Venus in sackcloth. Georges de La Tour's picture does not show a woman in sackcloth, but her chemise is coarse and simple enough to be a penitential garment, or, at least, the kind of garment that shows you were not thinking of personal adornment when you put it on. Even though the chemise is deeply open on the bosom, it does not seem to disclose flesh as such, but a flesh that has more akin to the wax of the burning candle, to the way the wax candle is irradiated by its own flame, and glows. So you could say that, from the waist up, this Mary Magdalene is on the high road to penitence, but, from the waist down, which is always the more problematic part, there is the question of her long, red skirt.

Left-over finery? Was it the only frock she had, the frock she went whoring in, then repented in, then set sail in? Did she walk all the way to the Sainte-Baume in this red skirt? It doesn't look travel-stained or worn or torn. It is a luxurious, even scandalous skirt. A scarlet dress for a scarlet woman.

The Virgin Mary wears blue. Her preference has sanctified the colour. We think of a "heavenly" blue. But Mary Magdalene wears red, the colour of passion. The two women are twin paradoxes. One is not what the other is. One is a virgin and a mother; the other is a non-virgin, and childless. Note how the English language doesn't contain a specific word to describe a woman who is grown-up, sexually mature and *not* a mother, unless such a woman is using her sexuality as her profession.

Because Mary Magdalene is a woman and childless she goes out into the wilderness. The others, the mothers, stay and make a church, where people come.

But why has she taken her pearl necklace with her? Look at it, lying in front of the mirror. And her long hair has been most beautifully brushed. Is she, yet, fully repentant?

In Georges de La Tour's painting, the Magdalene's hair is well brushed. Sometimes the Magdalene's hair is as shaggy as a Rastafarian's. Sometimes her hair hangs down upon, is inextricably mixed up with, her furs. Mary Magdalene is easier to read when she is hairy, when, in the wilderness, she wears the rough coat of her own desires, as if the desires of her past have turned into the hairy shirt that torments her present, repentant flesh.

Sometimes she wears only her hair; it never saw a comb, long, matted, unkempt, hanging down to her knees. She belts her own hair round her waist with the rope with which, each night, she lashes herself, making a rough tunic of it. On these occasions, the transformation from the young lovely, voluptuous Mary Magdalene, the happy non-virgin, the party girl, the woman taken in adultery -- on these occasions, the transformation is complete. She has turned into something wild and strange, into a female version of John the Baptist, a hairy hermit, as good as naked, transcending gender, sex obliterated, nakedness irrelevant.

Now she is one with such pole-sitters as Simeon Stylites, and other solitary cave-dwellers who communed with beasts, like St Jerome. She eats herbs, drinks water from the pool; she comes to resemble an even earlier incarnation of the "wild man of the woods" than John the Baptist. Now she looks like hairy Enkidu, from the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh.* The woman who once, in her grand, red dress, was vice personified, has now retired to an existential situation in which vice simply is not possible. She has arrived at the radiant, enlightened sinlessness of the animals. In her new, resplendent animality, she is now beyond choice. Now she has no option but virtue.

But there is another way of looking at it. Think of Donatello's Magdalene, in Florence -- she's dried up by the suns of the wilderness, battered by wind and rain, anorexic, toothless, a body entirely annihilated by the soul. You can almost smell the odour of the kind of sanctity that reeks from her -- it's rank, it's raw, it's horrible. By the ardour with which she has embraced the rigorous asceticism of penitence, you can tell how much she hated her early life of so-called "pleasure". The mortification of the flesh comes naturally to her. When you learn that Donatello intended the piece to be not black but gilded, that does not lighten its mood.

Nevertheless, you can see the point that some anonymous Man of the Enlightenment on the Grand Tour made two hundred years ago -- how Donatello's Mary Magdalene made him "disgusted with penitence".

Penitence becomes sado-masochism. Self-punishment is its own reward.

But it can also become kitsch. Consider the apocryphal story of Mary of Egypt. Who was a beautiful prostitute until she repented and spent the remaining forty-seven years of her life as a penitent in the desert, clothed only in her long hair. She took with her three loaves and ate a

mouthful of bread once a day, in the mornings; the loaves lasted her out. Mary of Egypt is clean and fresh. Her face stays miraculously unlined. She is as untouched by time as her bread is untouched by appetite. She sits on a rock in the desert, combing out her long hair, like a lorelei whose water has turned to sand. We can imagine how she smiles. Perhaps she sings a little song.

Georges de La Tour's Mary Magdalene has not yet arrived at an ecstasy of repentance, evidently. Perhaps, indeed, he has pictured her as she is just about to repent -- before her sea voyage in fact, although I would prefer to think that this bare, bleak space, furnished only with the mirror, is that of her cave in the woods. But this is a woman who is still taking care of herself. Her long, black hair, sleek as that of a Japanese woman on a painted scroll -- she must just have finished brushing it, reminding us that she is the patron saint of hairdressers. Her hair is the product of culture, not left as nature intended. Her hair shows she has just used the mirror as an instrument of worldly vanity. Her hair shows that, even as she meditates upon the candle flame, *this* world still has a claim upon her.

Unless we are actually watching her as her soul is drawn out into the candle flame.

We meet Mary Magdalene in the gospels, doing something extraordinary with her hair. After she massaged Jesus's feet with her pot of precious ointment, she wiped them clean with her hair, an image so astonishing and erotically precise it is surprising it is represented so rarely in art, especially that of the seventeenth century, when religious excess and eroticism went so often together. Magdalene, using her hair, that beautiful net with which she used to snare men as -- well, as a mop, a washcloth, a towel. And a slight element of the perverse about it, too. All in all, the kind of *gaudy gesture* a repentant prostitute *would* make.

She has brushed her hair, perhaps for the last time, and taken off her pearl necklace, also for the last time. Now she is gazing at the candle flame, which doubles itself in the mirror. Once upon a time, that mirror was the tool of her trade; it was within the mirror that she assembled all the elements of the femininity she put together for sale. But now, instead of reflecting her face, it duplicates the pure flame.

When I was in labour, I thought of a candle flame. I was in labour for nineteen hours. At first the pains came slowly and were relatively light; it was easy to ride them. But when they came more closely together, and grew more and more intense, then I began to concentrate my mind upon an imaginary candle flame.

Look at the candle flame as if it is the only thing in the world. How white and steady it is. At the core of the white flame is a cone of blue, transparent air; that is the thing to look at, that is the thing to concentrate on. When the pains came thick and fast, I fixed all my attention on the blue absence at the heart of the flame, as though it were the secret of the flame and, if I concentrated enough upon it, it would become *my* secret, too.

Soon there was no time to think of anything else. By then, I was entirely subsumed by the blue space. Even when they snipped away at my body, down below, to finally let the baby out the easiest way, all my attention was concentrated on the core of the flame.

Once the candle flame had done its work, it snuffed itself out; they wrapped my baby in a shawl and gave him to me.

Mary Magdalene meditates upon the candle flame. She enters the blue core, the blue absence. She becomes something other than herself.

The silence in the picture, for it is the most silent of pictures, emanates not from the darkness behind the candle in the mirror but from these two candles, the real candle and the mirror candle. Between them, the two candles disseminate light and silence. They have tranced the woman into enlightenment. She can't speak, won't speak. In the desert, she will grunt, maybe, but she will put speech aside, after this, after she has meditated upon the candle flame and the mirror. She will put speech aside just as she has put aside her pearl necklace and will put away her red skirt. The new person, the saint, is being born out of this intercourse with the candle flame.

But something has already been born out of this intercourse with the candle flame. See. She carries it already. She carries where, if she were a Virgin mother and not a sacred whore, she would rest her baby, not a living child but a *memento mori*, a skull.

UNCOLLECTED STORIES

The Scarlet House
The Snow Pavilion
The Quilt Maker

The Scarlet House

I remember, I'd been watching a hawk. There was an immense sky of the most innocent blue, blue of a bowl from which a child might just have drunk its morning milk and left behind a few whitish traces of cloud around the rim, and, imprinted on this sky, a single point of perfect stillness -- a hawk over the ruins. A hawk so still he seemed the central node of the sky and the source of the heavy silence which fell down on the ruins like invisible rain; an immobile hawk so high above the turning world that I was sure he would see a half rotating hemisphere below him; and, over this hemisphere, scampered the plump vole or delicious bunny that did not know it had been pinioned already by the eyebeam of its feathered, taloned fate imminent in the air. Morning, silence, a hawk, his prey and ruins. If I try very hard, I can also add to this landscape with my little tent, my half-track and, piece by piece, all my naturalist's equipment. . . I must have gone out to collect samples of the desolate flora of this empty place. Above the green abandonment of the deserted city, where the little foxes played, a rapt hawk gathered to himself all its haunted stillness.

Hawk plummets. He's unpremeditated and precise as Zen swordsmen, his fall subsumed to the aerial whizz of the rope that traps me.

I am sure of it -- beat me as much as you like; I remember it perfectly. Don't I?

The Count sits in a hall hung with embroideries depicting all the hierarchy of hell, a place, he claims, not unlike the Scarlet House. Soon, everywhere will be like the Scarlet House. Chaos is coming, says the Count, and giggles; the Count ends all his letters "yours entropically" and signs them with the peacock's quill dipped in the blood of a human sacrifice. Why did you come to these abandoned regions, my dear, surely you'd heard rumours that I and my fabulous retinue had already installed ourselves in the ruins, preparing chaos with the aid of a Tarot pack?

But I had no notion who the Count was when his bodyguard captured me. They stood around me as I writhed on the ground and they showed their fangs at me; they all file their canines to a point, it is a sign

of machismo among them. They wore jackets of black leather brightly studded with cabbalistic patterns; tall boots; snug leggings of black leather; and slick black helmets that fitted closely over the head and over the mouth, too, leaving only their pale eyes visible. Their eyes glittered like pebbles in a brook. They were armed with hand-guns and their belts bristled with knives. Each carried a coil of rope. A silence so perfect that it might never have been broken resumed itself after the hawk fell.

They hauled me off at the end of the rope they tied to the back of one of their motorcycles and made me run, tumble, bounce behind them on my way to the Scarlet House, though I must admit they drove quite slowly, so I was not much injured. The Scarlet House was built of white concrete and looked to me very much like a hospital, a large terminal ward. A few days in bed there, and the gravel rash, the grazes and bruises healed.

I remember everything perfectly. I know the ruins exist; at nights, I can hear the foxes barking in New Bond Street. That sound confirms the existence of the ruins though, of course, I can see nothing from the windows.

Meanwhile, in this blind place, the Count consults maps of the stars with the aid of his adviser, whose general efficiency is hindered by the epileptic fits with which he is afflicted. Though at the best of times his wits are out of order; he drools, too. His star-spangled robes are dabbled with spittle and spilled food and other randomly spattered bodily effluvia, for he's quite shameless in his odd little lusts and pleasures and the Count lets him indulge them all. He's the licensed fool and may even pull out his prick and play with it at mealtimes, and woe betide you if you flinch from one of his random displays of slobbering affection, for that's a sure sign you aren't in tune with chaos. But I'm not sure if he's a fool all the time; sometimes his eyes focus on me with the assessing glint of a used-car dealer. Then I am afraid he may be wondering what I can remember.

When he's been a good fool and made the Count chuckle, the Count tells Madame Schreck to give him access to one of the youngest of the girls. There are girls as young as twelve or thirteen and Fool likes his women just out of the shell. The Fool takes his present down to the dungeons. We won't see *her* again.

But was she not almost as good as dead the moment she set foot inside the Scarlet House? The moment of capture had sealed her fate.

As for myself, I am sure I was captured by the bikers, in the ruins. I am perfectly confident that is how I came to the Scarlet House. Yet the Count assures me, with equal, if not superior confidence, that I am mistaken, so that I am not sure which of us to believe.

The Count is dedicated to the obliteration of memory.

Memory, says the Count, is the main difference between man and the beasts; the beasts were born to live but man was born to remember. Out of his memory, he made abstract patterns of significant forms. Memory is the grid of meaning we impose on the random and bewildering flux of the world. Memory is the line we pay out behind us as we travel through time -- it is the clue, like Ariadne's, which means we do not lose our way. Memory is the lasso with which we capture the past and haul it from chaos towards us in nicely ordered sequences, like those of baroque keyboard music. The Count grimaces when he says that because he hates music even more that he hates mathematics but he loves to listen to screaming. "The entropic rhetoric of the scream", he calls it. Madame Schreck screeches for him sometimes at night, to augment his pleasure if we girls have screamed ourselves hoarse and cannot make any more noise.

Memory, origin of narrative; memory, barrier against oblivion; memory, repository of my being, those delicate filaments of myself I weave, in time into a spider's web to catch as much world in it as I can. In the midst of my self-spun web, there I can sit, in the serenity of my self-possession. Or so I would, if I could.

Because my memory is undergoing a sea-change. Though I am certain I remember, I am no longer sure what it is I remember nor, indeed, the reason why I should remember it.

Everyday, the Count attempts to erase the tapes from my memory. He has perfected a complex system of forgetting. Although I passionately assert how I was seized by the bikers in the ruins of New Bond Street, I know this assertion is no more than my last, paltry line of defence against the obliterations of the Count. He has already implanted in me a set of pseudo-memories, all of which sometimes play in my head together, throwing me into a dreadful confusion so that, though I remember everything, I have no means of ascertaining the actuality of those memories, which all return to me with shimmering vividness and a sense of lived and quantified experience. All of them.

Dear god, all of them.

Remembering is the first stage of absolute forgetfulness, says the occult Count, who goes by contraries. So I have been precipitated into a fugue of all the memories of all the women in the Scarlet House, where I live, now. This is his harem. We are left in the cruel care of Madame Schreck, who eats small birds such as fig-peckers and thrushes; she puts a whole one, spit-grilled, into her huge, red mouth as lusciously as if it were a liqueur chocolate and then she spits the bones out like the skin and pips of a grape. And she's got other, extravagant tastes as well; she likes to gorge upon the unborn young of rabbits. She acquires the foetuses from laboratories; she has them cooked for her in a cream sauce enriched with the addition of the yolk of an egg. She's a messy eater, she spills sauce on her bare belly and one of us must lick it off for her. She throws open her legs and shows us her hole; the way down and out, she says.

The count comes personally to the Scarlet House to give us our lessons. He always brings with him a brace of pigs on silken leashes which we girls must caress. The Count believes the pig is the prime example of perfected evolution, the multivorous beast that lives in shit, most entropic of substances, and consumes its own farrow, if it gets half the chance.

Like time, says the Count; like time.

Time, which is the enemy of memory.

The past is very much like the future.

I descended at dusk from a train on which I had been the only passenger in a dank, chill compartment lit only by one greenish, meagre gas mantle; its pair, on the other side of a mirror so scratched and defaced I could not see my own reflection in it, was broken. A mess of sandwich wrappings and orange peel littered the grimy floor. It had been a gloomy journey, across a fen shrouded in mist of autumn, an unpeopled landscape, flat, waterlogged, dotted here and there with pollarded willows with their melancholy look of men whose arms have been lopped off or mutilated women with whips upon their heads. I descended from the train at that lonely halt as night was falling; a man with a seamed, shuttered face came to take my ticket and, without a single word, humped my little tin trunk for me out of the ramshackle, wooden station to a shabby carriage in the lane outside, a shabby carriage with, between its shafts, a starveling pony whose ribs poked out under its drab, glossless coat. On the driving seat sat a thin, dark man in black livery who, to my shocked horror, I perceived

possessed no mouth at all. I started back; but the station master grabbed my hand and all but forced me into the carriage, then slammed the door on me.

As the poor beast began painfully to drag the carriage forward, I glimpsed the last of the world in which, until that aghast moment, I'd spent twenty-two years of girlhood; into the darkness before me I took the grinning face of the station master, pressed in farewell at the smeared window, transformed by a sudden rush of malevolent glee to a mask of pure evil.

I knew I must try to escape and tussled weakly with the door but it was locked fast. The inexorable carriage, lurching, ponderous, took me into the deepening shadows of the night, which seemed to be moving across the fen to engulf me. I lay back upon the leather seat and gave way to helpless tears.

At last we entered a dark courtyard virtually enclosed by tall, black trees; the gates shut immediately after we were inside. When the pony halted, the macabre coachman came to let me out. He reached for my hand to help me down with a certain courtesy and I had no choice but to touch him. His flesh felt as dank as the wet, night air of the fens which surrounded us.

Yet when I brought myself to look at his ghastly face in order to thank him, I saw his eyes speak though he had no mouth nor none of the necessary appendages of lips, teeth and tongue with which to do so, his grave eyes, the colour of the inside of the ocean, told me I was a young girl much to be pitied and, in luminous depths, I perceived the most dreadful intimation of my fate. At the door of the rambling, brick-built, red-tiled place, half farmhouse, half country mansion and now, had I but known it, wholly dedicated to the Count's experiments, Madame Schreck waited to greet me in the scarlet splendour of her satin dress that laid open to the view of her breasts and the unimaginable wound of her sex -- Madame Schreck, whom I would learn to fear far more than death itself, since death is finite.

Now you are at the place of annihilation, now you are at the place of annihilation.

Yet this version of my capture, in which despair settles slowly like a fall of grey snow upon the landscape through which I travelled towards

the moment when hope vanished, sometimes seems to me to have altogether too literary a flavour -- too much of a nineteenth-century quality, with its railway trains, its advertisment in the personal column of *The Times* for a governess that drew me, like a Bronte heroine, on a spool of fate over the bleak flat-lands. There's the inky, over-written smell of pseudo-memory about the gas lights and the mute coachman, though my skin still shudders from the remembered touch of his skin and I will never be able to forget his eyes.

But the Count, the Morpholytic Kid who presides over the death of forms, assures me that now the process of forgetting is well under way so that I can remember both the past and the future with equal facility, since both are illusory. I've made up a past out of some novelette once read on a train, perhaps; and I've guessed at a future. For there are no foxes in New Bond Street. Nor will they frolic in New Bond Street until the cards fall in such a way that the foxes will bound out, barking, from beneath them. Time past and time future combine to distort my memory.

But I have one memory I sometimes think must be the most authentic, since it is by far the most ghastly.

My beloved father has a straight back and an erect gait in spite of the seventy summers that have turned his hair to a spume of white foam. We sit at a round tea-table with a red plush cover in our pleasant apartment, the windows open on to a balcony where a little breeze stirs the heavy heads of my fine show of geraniums, white, salmon pink and scarlet, all banked together, exuding a delicious, spicy odour.

How I loved that room. . . the slippery horsehair sofa with the paisley shawl thrown over it and the piles of cushions my mother had embroidered with all manner of brightly coloured butterflies and flowers; the rosewood cabinet filled with china shepherdesses and bird-catchers, all covered with a fine bloom of dust -- I'm not the best of housekeepers; there is a stain on the Persian carpet which marks the spot where I spilled a bowl of hot chocolate when I was six years old. There is a china bowl filled with pot pourri on the mantlepiece.

My mother used to make pot pourri every summer; she would bring back the flowers from our house in the country. Now she is dead but she still presides over our tea-table; there on the wall she smiles at us from a bird's-eye maple frame, a tinted photograph taken shortly after she and my father were married. She's still very young, not much older than I am

now; she wears a wide straw hat decorated with pink ribbon and a bunch of daisies. Its brim gently shades her eyes, of which the long lashes are so dark they look like the fringed centres of anemones. Her eyes are a mysterious, darkish green.

They say I have her eyes.

Some women can take their eyes out, says the Count; he is always particularly angry if when he is engaged in erasing the tapes of memory, I begin -- as I sometimes, quite helplessly, do -- to repeat, over and over again, as if one tape were stuck: "They say I have my mother's eyes, they say I have my mother's eyes." Then he beats me with a knotted whip until my shoulders bleed; when visiting his women, he never forgets a whip. Then he hands me over to Madame Schreck for a spell in the sensory deprivation unit, I must crawl into the oblivion of her hole for a while.

My father and I sit under my mother's photograph in an old-fashioned room in which everything is loved because it is familiar. Twenty-two years of my life have unfurled in this room like a slow, quiet fan. I pour tea for my father from a silver pot with a spout like the neck of a swan. The cups have narrow stems and are made of fine, white porcelain with scrolls of faded gold around the rims. My own cup cracked under its weight of years long ago; I remember how my father carefully riveted it together again, until it was as good as new. There is a glass saucer containing a sliced lemon on the table, its sharp, clean scent refreshes this sultry July afternoon. The light falls in regular parallelograms through our slatted blinds so we know we are in control of the weather. In the park outside, a few birds cheep the exhausted songs of high summer.

The staccato click of bootheels. The peremptory barrage of gloved fists on the panels of the door. When the old man reaches for the revolver he always wears in the holster under his armpit, they gun him down. His white hair floods with blood as red as the painted house of Madame Schreck, who is waiting for me in the subterranean torture-chamber deep at the heart of the maze of my brain, the Minotaur with the head of a woman and the orifice of a sow.

My father tumbles across the tea-table. Cups, saucers fly apart in shards as he crashes down. His fingers grasp at the empty air to catch one last, lost handful of world between them before it slips away from him for ever.

Then they seized me, stripped me, raped me on the silk birds of the Persian carpet under my mother's picture, threw a coat over me, thrust a gun in my back and forced me down the echoing staircase to the armoured car waiting outside. I had been a virgin. I was in great pain.

Madame Schreck, in a smart uniform of drab olive, with sheer black stockings and those six-inch heels of hers that stab the linoleum as she walks, took my particulars at the mahogany desk. When I refused to tell her where my brother was, she made me lie down on the camp-bed in the corner of the room, under a propaganda poster of the Count riding upon a winged snake and, with judicious impassivity, she applied the lighted end of her cigarette to the interior membrane of my labia minor. Through the open window, I remember, I saw a hawk immobile at the central node of the blue sky of the midsummer. From his spread wings dropped a silence that stunned me more than the pain she inflicted.

An orderly took me to the Scarlet House, a block-house with red-painted doors. He had almost to carry me because I could scarcely walk. There was no mouth in his face. No mouth. His eyes were feral, wild, scarcely human.

"Aha!" says the Count in a great good humour; "Your memory is playing tricks on you!"

He himself, such is his magnanimity, received me in a vast, echoing hall hung with extravagant tapestries. I retain only the most confused recollections of its exterior but I know the inside perfectly well, now. It is a maze of cells like the inside of a brain. He took away my old coat that was still bundled around my shoulders and dropped it into an incinerator. Then he showed me the sacrificial knife, which is made of black obsidian, and said to me: "As of the present moment you inhabit the world no longer since the least impulse of my will can cause you to disappear from it."

But his methods are more subtle than the knife. Dedicated as he is to the dissolution of forms, he intends to erode my sense of being by equipping me with a multiplicity of beings, so that I confound myself with my own profusion of pasts, presents and futures.

I am eroding, I am wearing away. I am being stroked as smooth as stone is by the hands of the sea; the elements that went to make up my uniqueness fall apart as he erases the tapes of my memory and makes his own substitutions. For, if my first capture incorporates within it ruins that

do not yet exist and my second capture resonates with too many echoes of books I might have read, then my third and by far my most moving capture might only recapitulate a Middle-European nightmare, an episode from Prague or Vienna seen in a movie, perhaps, or told me by a complete stranger during the exposed privacy of a long train journey. For sometimes I cannot believe I've suffered so much.

If only I could remember everything perfectly, just as it happened, then loaded with the ambivalent burden of my past, I should be free.

But in this brothel where memory's the prostitute there is no such thing as freedom; all is governed by the fall of the cards. Madame Schreck, of course, is the High Priestess or Female Pope. The Count has given her a blue robe to wear over that terrible red dress that reminds us all, every time we see it, of the irresoluble and animal part of ourselves we all hold in common, since we are women. She is the paradigm of sexuality. At her hairy hole we all pay homage as if it were the mouth of an oracular cave.

When we play the Tarot Game, Madame Schreck sits on a small throne. They bring down the Count's special book, the book in black ink on purple paper that he keeps hanging from a twisted beam in his private apartments; they open it up and spread it out on her open lap, to mimic her sex, which is also a forbidden book.

The Tarot Game is like those games of chess that medieval princes performed on the black and white marble chequered floors of their palaces, using men for pieces. They'd dress one team in black and one team in white; the knights would be mounted on suitably caparisoned chargers who sometimes unloaded a freight of dung as they stepped delicately sideways, to prove the game was real. The bishops would be properly mitred; the pawns, no doubt, dressed as common militia. The Count plays the Game of Tarot with a major arcana of fourteen of his retinue. If Madame Schreck adopts the emblems of the Papess to the manner born, the Fool remains himself, of course. They mask themselves and perform random dances to sounds not unlike screaming that the Count extorts from an electronic synthesiser. He reads the patterns the hallucinated pack make at random and so he invokes chaos. He has methodology. He is a scientist, in his way.

Now, altogether I've been erased and substituted and played back so many times my memory is nothing but a palimpsest of possibilities and probabilities, there are some elements he cannot rid me of and these, interestingly enough, are not those of blood on an old man's hair or his leather-clad minions closing in on me with mineral menace of eyes like stones; no. There is a hawk, drawing towards it in a still sky all the elements of which a complex world was once composed. And some man haunts the labyrinths inside my head and he was born without a mouth. And there are certain kinds of eyes, those eyes that, once seen, can never be forgotten.

When I helplessly repeat, "I saw a hawk, I saw a hawk, I saw a hawk. . ." or, "They say I have my mother's eyes", the Count half flays me alive. His anger is a nervous reflex, like the crazy courage of a coward in arms against his own weakness; that still, in my extremity, I should persist in remembering reminds him of the possibility, which is appalling to him, that there might be a remedy for chaos.

I need hardly tell you that we, the women of the Scarlet House, live in absolute isolation, although the planned interpenetration of all our experience gives us a vague but pervasive sense of closeness to one another. When on a pillow wet with tears, I live over again the fatal moment of capture, it might be your dread I feel, or yours, or yours -- a different kind of dread than mine which, nevertheless, I experience as though it were my own and so I draw nearer to you all.

Yet our lives have contracted to the limitations imposed upon us by the grisly machinery of the Count's harem. We are not ourselves; we are his playing cards, a shifting chorus to the Count, to Madame Schreck, to the Fool and to the others I do not know but only see on the nights he plays the Tarot Game, hieratic figures like apparitions from a forgotten theogony who rise and fall at the random dictates of whim. "God is random," says the Count who believes in the irresolute triumph of time over its own rectification, memory.

We whisper among ourselves, of course, like toys might in the privacy of the toy cupboard after the little master is tucked up in bed for the night. Our whispers are soft, awed by the predicament in which we find ourselves. In the night-time darkness of our quarters, we cannot make out one another's features. Our disembodied voices rustle like dead leaves and sometimes we stretch out our hands to touch one another, lightly, to lay a

finger on one another's mouths to assure ourselves a voice issues from that aperture. Like drifting cobwebs, the insubstantial caresses linger for a moment upon our skins. We manifest ourselves in a ghostly fashion for are we not already shadows? Phantoms of the dead, phantoms of the living, there is little to choose between two states of limbo.

Nevertheless, I have certain precious mnemonics. A hawk; a man without a mouth; and eyes without a face. As long as I retain them in my memory, even if I forget any kind of context for them, then I can keep back something of myself from the Count's dissolving philosophy. He may beat me as much as he pleases; I'm not afraid of encountering Death's grisly skeleton in the gavotte of the arcana, and that's something.

(If you *do* find yourself partnering the skeleton, you vanish, of course.)

The Fool never says a word but only screeches and babbles; he's growing perfect, he's quite forgotten how to speak. When the Count beats me and I scream, he says: *"Now* you're talking! Who needs words?"

We are his harem and also his finishing school. The curriculum is divided into three parts. First, we learn how to forget; second, we forget how to speak; third, we cease to exist.

There are no mirrors in the Scarlet House because mirrors propagate souls. A mirror shows you who you are and not one single one of us poor girls has the slightest notion of what that might have been. Yet, when the Count beats us, we feel pain and so we know we are still living, not yet quite annihilated, and the anguish that overcomes me when I remember I am no longer myself is quite real and persists all the time.

Yet the fugue of our common memory is also a kind of consolation. Though I am not myself, sometimes, when we are forced to play at the Tarot Game, I and the rest of the minor arcana, I sense I may be, in some as yet formless and incoherent way, almost a legion of selves. When we lie in our sleeping quarters and touch one another to confirm that the ripped envelopes of our bodies are still there, even if the contents have all been misdirected, it is almost as though my body had been transformed into one of those many-limbed and many-headed effigies sculptured in Indian temples -- no point, any longer, in trying to ascertain the original from my bewilderment. The more the Count scrambles the tapes, the more the harem becomes one single woman with a multiplicity of hands and eyes

and no name, no past, no future -- first, a being in a void; and, soon, a void itself.

Chaos is like a vat of acid. Everything disintegrates.

Nevertheless, I cling to my mnemonics like a drowning man to a spar. As time passes and wears me away, I meditate upon them more and more. I am beginning to reconcile myself completely to the fact that they may not contain any element at all of real memory. It was hard to bear, at first, but soon I understood how the hawk, the face without a mouth, the eyes without a face, are all the residue of the world I still carry with me that does *not* elude me and, if they are not precisely memories, then they may be, in some sense, like those odds and ends that all refugees carry with them, from which they refuse to be parted, although they're quite insignificant -- a spoon with a bent handle, say; or a tram ticket issued by a city that no longer exists. Small items, meaningless in themselves, and yet keys to an entire system of meanings, if only I can remember. . .

The hawk, now. If I think about the hawk long enough, I remember that I do not remember it. That's a painful beginning; but one must begin somewhere. There was a sky, certainly; there's plenty of sky outside the Scarlet House, though we see none of it inside. Sky. Now, the hawk -- down! he comes, like a butcher's cleaver thwacking through meat. The hawk drops on the plump, careless bunny romping through the clover and young grass; the hawk's eye, like a telescopic lens, zooms in on me as I lie in the sun with the smell of fresh grass in my clothes. Yes. I remember the green scent of a summer's day, not unlike the spicy odour of crushed geranium leaves. (Concentrate of fleshly impressions, any fleshly impression; reef it in from the past, from the time before my time in the Scarlet House. Scent of grass, of geraniums, of slivered lemons. All these scents bring back the world.)

As I lie in the fresh grass I have reconstructed out of memory, I begin to perceive some element of paranoia in the image of the hawk. For I did not know that I was watched. I was ignorant of my clawed, feathered fate. And so I will be seized by force. Capture; and rape, from the Latin, *rapere,* to seize by force. . . *that's* a curious pedantic bunny to hunt out from the back alleys of memory. I must have studied Latin, once, though for what purpose I can't imagine. So the capture and the rape elide. Man is an animal who insists on making *patterns,* says the Count contemptuously;

all the world you think so highly of is nothing but pretty floral wallpaper pasted up over chaos.

The Count prepares chaos in his crucible. When he plays his Tarot Game, he makes an institution out of chaos. He signs himself, yours entropically, with the quill of a hawk dipped in the blood of ruptured virginities.

The hawk drops. They throw me down on the silk birds of the antique Persian carpet and rape me. And, to my amazement, a pattern emerges, although it is stylised as those woven birds I may once have walked on. For the hawk is nothing more and nothing less than the memory of my capture, preserved as an image, or an icon.

I cannot tell you with what inexpressible relief I greeted the concretisation, not of a memory, but of an inter-connection that made some sense in my plight to me. It was as if I'd gone to the confused jumble of limbs and hands and eyes scattered promiscuously on the floor of the harem and unerringly been able to pick out my own hand, screw it back on to my wrist and feel the blood flow back into it. Or pull out my mother's eyes from the mess, wipe them carefully on my sleeve and slip them back into my own eye sockets, where they belong.

Now, these are my mother's eyes that jumped out of the old photograph into my head; and there are also the eyes of the mute coachman that were full so full of pity for me that my heart stopped momentarily, out of fear for my own predicament. Those eyes, too, are rimmed with endless black lashes, they've been put in with a sooty finger. They move me as only the mute language of the eye can do and I do not know if, indeed, they are my own eyes, because there are no mirrors here, or if they are the eyes of somebody I loved, once, before they dissolved in my memory. However, I must slip these eyes back into some head or other; any head will do, to make sense of those eyes which will continue to speak even if the mouth is sealed up.

Those eyes hold all the speech which will be denied to me when forgetting forges my lips together and I cannot speak at all, like the mute coachman, like the mute orderly whose eyes had been excised and replaced with those of a beast of prey. Or else with stones, like the bikers, whose mouths were hidden by their leather hoods so you could not tell whether they had mouths or no.

And so I established the declension of my undoing, from capture to annihilation: the hawk, the face without a mouth, the eyes without a face. After that will come nothing. I shall be perfectly silent.

When I perceived I'd organised these disparate elements into a grid, or system of connections, I felt for the first time I entered the obscure portals of the Scarlet House, a flood of joy. I examined the abused flesh of my breasts and belly and felt, not sorrow I'd been so mauled, but anger the Count had mistreated me; and what if it's only that the puppet turns against the puppet-master: Isn't the puppet-master dependent on the submission of his dolls for his authority? Can't I, in the systematic randomness of my connections, control the Game?

The ghost reassembles the events that rendered it into non-being. As it does so, hourly it grows more substantial.

And where there's no hope, there's no fear, either. Not even fear of Madame Schreck, through whose hole we must all crawl to extinction, one day; unless it is the way to freedom.

This morning, the Count busily erased all the tapes of my Viennese apocalypse; I am glad of it, it was a vile memory and I am heartily sorry for whoever it was among my companions to whom it belonged. He tittered with his habitual beastly glee when at last he'd rid me of the compulsion, that nervous, that hiccuping reiteration; "They say I have my mother's eyes." But that was because he does not know I no longer need to remember it, whether it were true or no; I know all that I need to know to enable me to endure the time of the torturers and all its secondhand furniture of fear -- the magic robes, the book of pretend-spells, the silence of the fool, the extinction of the whore.

This world's a vile oubliette. Yet in its refuse I will find the key to free me.

The Snow Pavilion

The motor stalled in the middle of a snowy landscape, lodged in a rut, wouldn't budge an inch. How I swore! I'd planned to be snug in front of a roaring fire, by now, a single malt on the mahogany wine-table (a connoisseur's piece) beside me, the five courses of Melissa's dinner savourously aromatising the kitchen; to complete the decor, a labrador retriever's head laid on my knee as trustingly as if I were indeed a country gentleman and lolled by rights among the chintz. After dinner, before I read our customary pre-coital poetry aloud to her, my elegant and accomplished mistress, also a connoisseur's piece, might play the piano for her part-time pasha while I sipped black, acrid coffee from her precious little cups.

Melissa was rich, beautiful and rather older than I. The servants slipped me looks of sly complicity; no matter how carefully I rumpled my sheets, they knew when a bed hadn't been slept in. The master of the house had a pied-a-terre in London when the House was sitting and the House was sitting tight. I'd met him only once, at the same dinner party where I'd met her -- he'd been off-hand with me, gruff. I was young and handsome and full of promise; my relations with husbands rarely prospered. Wives were quite amother matter. Women, as Mayakovosky justly opined, are very partial to poets.

And now her glamorous motor car had broken down in the snow. I'd borrowed it for a trip to Oxford, ostensibly to buy books, utilising, with my instinctual cunning, the weather as an excuse. Last night, the old woman had been shaking her mattress with a vengeance -- such snow! When I woke up the bedroom was full of luminous snow light, catching in the coils of Melissa's honey-coloured hair, and I'd experienced, once again, but, this time, almost uncontrollably, the sense of claustrophobia that sometimes afflicted me when I was with her.

I'd said, let's read some snowy poetry together, after dinner tonight, Melissa, a tribute of white verses to the iconography of the weather. Any excuse, no matter how far fetched, to get her out of the house -- too much luxury on an empty stomach, that was the trouble. Always the same eyes

too big for his belly, as grandma used to say; grandma spotted the trait when this little fellow lisped and toddled and pissed the bed before he knew what luxury was, even. Cultural indigestion, I tell you, the gripe in the bowels of your spirit. How can I get out of here, away from her subtly flawed antique mirrors, her French perfume decanted into eighteenth-century crystal bottles, her inscrutably smirking ancestresses in their gilt, oval frames? And her dolls, worst of all, her blasted dolls.

Those dolls that had never have been played with, her fine collection of antique women, part of the apparatus of Melissa's charm, her piquant originality that lay well on the safe side of quaint. A dozen or so of the finest lived in her bedroom in a glass-fronted, satinwood cabinet lavishly equipped with such toyland artefacts and miniature sofas and teeny-tiny grand pianos. They had heads made of moulded porcelain, each dimple and bee-stung underlip sculpted with loving care. Their wigs and over-lifelike eyelashes were made of real hair. She told me their eyes had been manufactured by the same craftsman in glass who made those terribly precious paperweights filled with magic snowstorms. Whenever I woke up in Melissa's bed, the first thing I saw were a dozen pairs of shining eyes that seemed to gleam wetly, as if in lacrimonious accusation of my presence there, for the dolls, like Melissa, were perfect ladies and I, in my upwardly social mobile nakedness -- a nakedness that was, indeed, the essential battledress for such storm-troopers as I! -- patently no gentleman.

After three days of that kind of style, I badly needed to sit in a public bar, drink coarse pints of bitter, swap double entendres with the barmaid; but I could hardly tell milady that. Instead, I must use my vocation to justify my day off. Lend me the car, Melissa, so that I can drive to Oxford and buy a book of snowy verses, since there's no such book in the house. And I'd made my purchase and managed to fit in my bread, cheese and badinage as well. A good day. Then, almost home again and here I was, stuck fast.

The fields were all brim-full of snow and the dark sky of late afternoon already swollen and discoloured with the next fall. Flocks of crows wheeled endlessly upon the invisible carousels of the upper air, occasionally emitting a rusty caw. A glance beneath the bonnet showed me only that I did not know what was wrong and must get out to trudge along a lane where the mauve shadows told me snow and the night would arrive

together. My breath smoked. I wound Melissa's husband's muffler round my neck and dug my fists into his sheepskin pockets; his borrowed coat kept me snug and warm although the cold made the nerves in my forehead hum with a thin, high sound like that of the wind in telephone wires.

The leafless trees, the hillside quilted by intersections of dry-stone walling -- all had been subdued to monochrome by the severity of last night's blizzard. Snow clogged every sound but that of the ironic punctuation of the crows. No sign of another presence; the pastoral cows were all locked up in the steaming byre, Colin Clout and Hobbinol sucked their pipes by the fireside in pastoral domesticity. Who would be outside, today, when he could be warm and dry, inside.

Too white. It is too white, out. Silence and whiteness at such a pitch of twinned intensity you know what it must be like to live in a country where snow is not a charming, since infrequent, visitor that puts its cold garlands on the trees so prettily we think they are playing at blossoming. (What an aptly fragile simile, with its Botticellian nuance. I congratulated myself.) No. Today is as cold as the killing cold of the perpetually white countries; today's atrocious candour is that of those white freckles that are the stigmata of frostbite.

My sensibility, the exquisite sensibility of a minor poet, tingled and crisped at the sight of so much whiteness.

I was certain that soon I'd come to a village where I could telephone Melissa; then she would send the village taxi for me. But the snow-fields now glimmered spectrally in an ever-thickening light and still there was no sign of life about me in the whole, white world but for the helmeted crows creaking down towards their nests.

Then I came to a pair of wrought-iron gates standing open on a drive. There must be some mansion or other at the end of the drive that would offer me shelter and, if they were half as rich as they ought to be, to live in such style, then they would certainly know Melissa and might even have me driven back to her by their own chauffeur in a warm car that would smell deliciously of new leather. I was sure they must be rich, the country side was lousy with the rich; hadn't I flattened a brace of pheasants on my way to Oxford? Encouraged, I turned in between the gate-posts, on which snarled iron gryphons sporting circumcision caps of snow.

The drive wound through an elm copse where the upper limbs of the bare trees were clogged with beastly lice of old crows' nests. I could

tell that nobody had come this way since the snow fell, for only rabbit slots and the cuneiform prints of birds marked surfaces already crisping with frost. The drive took me uphill. My shoes and trouser bottoms were already wet through; it grew darker, colder and the old woman must have given her mattress a tentative shake or two, again, for a few more flakes drifted down and caught on my eyelashes so I first saw that house through a dazzle as of unshed tears, although, I assure you, I was out of the habit of crying.

I had reached the brow of a hill. Before me, in a hollow, magically surrounded by a snowy formal garden, lay a jewel of a mansion in a voluptuous style of English renaissance and every one of its windows blazed with light. I imagined myself describing it to Melissa- "a vista like visible Debussy". Enchanting. But, though lights streamed out in every direction, all was silent except for the crackling of the frosty trees. Lights and frost; in the winter sky above me, stars were coming out. Especially for my cultured patroness, I made an elision of the stars in the mansion of the heavens and the lights of the great house. So who was it, this snowy afternoon, who'd bagged a triad of fine images for her? Why, her clever boy! How pleased she'd be. And now I could declare the image factory closed for the day and get on with the real business of living, the experience of which that lovely house seemed to promise me in such abundance.

Yet, since the place was so well lit, the front door at the top of the serpentine staircase left open as for expected guests, why were there still no traces of arrivals or departures in the snow on which my footprints extended backwards to the lane and Melissa's abandoned car? And no figures to be glimpsed through any window, nor sound of life at all?

The vast empty hall serenely dominated by an immense chandelier, the faceted pendants of which chinked faintly in the currents of warm air and stippled with shifting, prismatic shadows walls wreathed in white stucco. This chandelier intimidated me, like too grand a butler but, all the same, I found the bellpull and tugged it. Somewhere inside a full-mouthed bell tolled; its reverberations set the chandelier a-tinkle but even when everything settled down again, nobody came.

I hauled again on the bellpull; still no reply, but a sudden wind blew a flurry of snow or sleet around me into the hall. The chandelier rocked musically in the draught. Behind me, outside, the air was full of the

taste of snow -- the storm was about to begin again. Nothing for it but to step bravely over the indifferent threshold and stamp my feet on the doormat with enough eclat to announce my arrival to the entire ground floor.

It was by far the most magnificent house I'd ever seen, and warm, so warm my frozen fingers throbbed. Yet all was white inside as the night outside, white walls, white paint, white drapes and a faint perfume everywhere, as though many rich women in beautiful dresses had drifted through the hall on their way to drinks before dinner, leaving behind them their spoor of musk and civet. The very air, here, mimicked the caress of their naked arms, intimate, voluptuous, rare.

My nostrils flared and quivered. I should have liked to have made love to every one of those lovely beings whose presence here was most poignant in her absence; it was a house built and furnished only for pleasure, for the indulgence of the flesh, for elegant concupiscence. I felt like Mignon in the land of the lemon trees; this is the place where I would like to live. I screwed up sufficient wincing courage to shout out: "Anyone at home?" But only the chandelier tinkled in reply.

Then, a sudden creak behind me; I spun round to see the door swing to on its hinges with a soft, inexorable click. At that, the chandelier above me seemed to titter uncontrollably, as if with glee to see me locked in.

It is the wind, only the wind. Try to believe it is only the wind that blew the door shut behind you, keep a strong hold on that imagination of yours. Stop that shaking, all at once uneasy; walk slowly to the door, don't look nervous. It is the wind. Or else -- perhaps -- a trick of the owners, a practical joke. I grasped the notion gratefully. I knew the rich loved practical jokes.

But as soon as I realised it must be a practical joke, I knew I was not alone in the house because its apparent emptiness was all part of the joke. Then I exchanged one kind of unease for another. I became terribly self-conscious. Now I must watch my step; whatever happened, I must look as if I knew how to play the game in which I found myself. I tried the door but I was locked firmly in, of course. In spite of myself, I felt a faint panic, stifled it. . . No, you are *not* at their mercy.

The hall remained perfectly empty. Closed doors on either side of me; the staircase swept up to an empty landing. Am I to meet my hosts in

embarrassment and humiliation, will they all come bouncing -- "boo!" -- out of hidey holes in the panelling, from behind sweeping curtains to make fun of me? A huge mirror behind an extravagant arrangement of arum lilies showed me a poor poet not altogether convincingly rigged out in borrowed country squire's gear. I thought, how pinched and pale my face looks; a face that's eaten too much bread and margarine in its time. Come, now, liven up! You left bread and margarine behind you long ago, at grandma's house. Now you are a house-guest of the Lady Melissa. Your car has just broken down in the lane; you are looking for assistance.

Then, to my relief but also my increased disquiet, I saw a face behind my own, reflected, like mine, in the mirror. She must have known I could spy her, peeking at me behind my back. It was a pale, soft, pretty face, streaming blonde hair, and it sprang out quite suddenly from the reflections of the backs of the lilies. But when I turned, she -- young, tricksy, fleet of foot -- was gone already, though I could have sworn I heard a carillon of giggles, unless my sharp, startled movement had disturbed the chandelier, again.

This fleeting apparition let me know for sure I was observed. ("How amusing, a game of hide-and-seek. All the same, do you think, perhaps, the chauffeur could. . .") With the sullen knowledge of myself as appointed clown, I opened the first door I came to on the ground floor, expecting to discover my tittering audience awaiting me.

It was perfectly empty.

A white on white reception room, all bleached, all pale, sidetables of glass and chrome, artefacts of white lacquer, upholstery of thick, white velvet. Company was expected; there were decanters, bowls of ice, dishes of nuts and olives. I was tempted to swallow a cut-glass tumbler full of something-or-other, to snatch a handful of salted almonds -- I was parched and starving, only that pub sandwich since breakfast. But it would never do to be caught in the act by the fair-haired girl I'd glimpsed in the hall. Look, she's left her doll behind her, forgotten in the deep cushioning of an armchair.

How the rich indulge their children! Not a doll so much as a little work of art; the cash register at the back of my mind rang up twenty guineas at the sight of this floppy Pierrot with his skull-cap, his white satin pyjamas with the black buttons down the front, all complete, and that authentic pout of comic sadness on his fine china face. *Mon ami Pierrot,*

poor old fellow, limp limbs a-dangle, all anguished sensibility and no moral fibre. I know how you feel. But, as I exchanged my glance of pitying complicity with him, there came a sharp, melodious twang like a note from an imperious tuning fork, from beyond the half-open double doors. After a startled moment, I sprang into the dining room, summoned.

I had never seen anything like that dining room, except at the movies -- not even at the dinner where I'd met Melissa. Fifteen covers laid out on a tongue-shaped spit of glass; but I hardly had time to take in the splendour of the fine china, the lead crystal, because the door into the hall still swung on its hinges and I knew I had missed her by seconds. So the daughter of the house is indeed playing "catch" with me; and where has she got to, now?

Soft, softly on the white carpets; I leave deep prints behind me but do not make a sound. And still no sign of life, only the pale shadows of the candles; yet, somehow, everywhere a sense of hushed expectancy, as of the night before Christmas.

Then I heard a patter of running footsteps. But these footsteps came from a part of the house where no carpets muffled them, somewhere high above me. As I poised, ears a-twitch, there came from upstairs or downstairs, or milady's chamber, a spring of thin, high laughter agitating the chandeliers; then the sound of many, many running feet overhead. For a moment, the whole house seemed to tremble with unseen movement; then, just as suddely, all was silent again.

I resolutely set myself to search the upper rooms.

All these rooms were quite empty. But my always nascent paranoia, now tingling at the tip of every nerve, assured me they had all been vacated the very moment I entered them. Every now and then, as I made my increasingly grim-faced tour of the house, I heard bursts of all kinds of delicious merriments but never from the room next to the one in which I stood. These voices started and stopped as if switched on and off and, of course, were part and parcel of the joke; this joke was my unease. In what, by its size and luxury, must have been the master bedroom, the polar bearskin rug thrown over the bed was warm and rumpled as if someone had just been lying there and now hid, perhaps, in the ivorine wardrobe, enjoying my perplexity. And I could have wrecked their fun if only -- if only! -- I had the courage to fling open the pale doors and catch my

reluctant hosts crouching, as I thought, among the couture. But I did not dare do that.

The staircarpets gave way to scrubbed boards and still I had not seen anything living except the possibility of a face in the mirror, although the entire house was full of evidence of life. These upper floors were dimly lit, only single lights in holders at intervals along the walls, but one door was standing open and light spilled out onto the passage, like an invitation.

A good fire glowed in a neat little range where nightclothes were warming on the brass fender. I felt a sudden, sharp pang of disappointment to find her trail lead me to the nursery; I had been duped of all the fleshly adventures the house had promised me and that, damn them, must be part of the joke, too. All the same, if I indulged the fancy of the child I'd seen in the mirror, perhaps I might engage the fancy of her mother, who must be still young enough to enjoy the caress of a bearskin bedstead; and not, I'd be bound, inimical to poetry, either.

This mother, who had condemned even the nursery to whiteness, white walls, white painted furniture, white rug, white curtains, all chic as hell. Even the child had been made a slave to fashion. Yet, though the nursery itself had succumbed to the interior designer's snowdrift that had engulfed the entire house, its inhabitants had not. I'd never seen so many dolls before, not even in Melissa's cabinet, and all quite exquisite, as if they'd just come from the shop, although some of them must be older than I was. How Melissa would have loved them!

Dolls sat on shelves with their legs stuck out before them, dolls spilled from toychests. Fine ladies in taffeta bustles and French hats, babies in every gradation of cuteness. A limp-limbed, golden-haired creature in pink satin sprawled as if in sensual abandon on the rug in front of the fire. A wonderfully elaborate lady in a kitsch Victorian pelisse of maroon silk, with brown hair under a feather straw bonnet, lay in an armchair by the fire with as proprietorial an air as if the room belonged to her. A delicious lass in a purple velvet riding habit occupied the saddle of the wonderful albino rocking horse.

Now at last I was surrounded by beautiful women and they were dumb repositories of all the lively colours that had been exiled from the place, vivid as a hot-house, but none of them existed, all were mute, were

fictions and that multitude of glass eyes, like tears congealed in time, made me feel very lonely.

Outside, the snow flurried against the windows; the storm had begun in earnest. Inside, there was still one threshold left to cross. I guessed she would be there, waiting for me, whoever she was, although I hesitated, if only momentarily, before the door that lead to the night nursery, as if unseen gryphons might guard it.

Faint glow of a night light on the mantelpiece; a dim tranquillity, here, where the air is full of the warm, pale smells of childhood, of clean hair, of soap, of talcum powder, the incenses of her sanctuary. And the moment I entered the night nursery, I could hear her transparent breathing; she had hardly hidden herself at all, not even pulled the covers of her white-enamelled crib around her. I had taken the game seriously but she, its instigator, had not; she had fallen fast asleep in the middle of it, her eyelids buttoned down, her long, blonde, patrician hair streaming over the pillow.

She wore a white, fragile, lace smock and her long, white stockings were fine as the smoky breath of a winter's morning. She had kicked off her white kid sandals. This little hunter, this little quarry, lay curled up with her thumb wedged, baby-like, in her mouth.

The wind yowled in the chimney and snow pelted the window. The curtains were not yet drawn so I closed them for her and at once the room denied tempest, so I could have thought I had been snug all my life. Weariness came over me; I sank down in the basketwork chair by her bed. I was loath to leave the company of the only living thing I'd found in the mansion and even if Nanny brusquely stormed in to interrogate me, I reassured myself that she must know how fond her little charge was of hide-and-seek indeed, must have been in complicity with the game, to let me wander about the nursery suite in this unconventional fashion. And if Mummy came in, now, for goodnight kisses? Well so much the better; I should be discovered demonstrating the tenderness of a poet at the cradle of a child.

If nobody came? I would endure the anti-climax; I'd just take the weight off my feet for a while, and then slip out. Yet I must admit I felt a touch of disappointment as time passed and I was forced reluctantly to abandon all hope of an invitation to dinner. They'd forgotten all about me! Careless even of their own games, they had left off playing in the middle

of the chase, just as the child had done, and retired into the immutable privacy of the rich. I promised myself that at least I'd help myself to half a tumbler of good whisky on my way out, to see me warmly back to the lane and the stark trudge home.

The child stirred in her sleep and muttered indecipherably. Her fists clenched and unclenched. Her cheeks were delicately flushed a pale, luminous pink. Such skin -- the fine texture of childhood, the incomparable down of skin that has never gone out in the cold. The more I watched beside her, the frailer she looked, the more transparent. I had never, in my life before, watched beside a sleeping child. The milky smell of innocence and sentiment suffused the night nursery.

I had anticipated, I suppose, some sort of gratified lust from this game of hide-and-seek through the mansion if not the satisfaction of lust of the flesh, then that of lust of the spirit, of vanity; but the more I mimicked tenderness towards the sleeper, the more tender I became. Oh, my shabby-sordid life! I thought. How she, in her untouchable sleep, judges me.

Yet she was not a peaceful sleeper. She twitched like a dog dreaming of rabbits and sometimes she moaned. She snuffled constantly and then, quite loudly, coughed. The cough rumbled in her narrow chest for a long time and it struck me that the child, so pale and sleeping with such racked exhaustion, was a sick child. A sick, spoiled little girl who ruled the household with a whim, and yet, poor little tyrant, went unloved; they must have been glad she had dropped off to sleep, so they could abandon the game she had forced them to play. She had fairy-tale, flaxen hair and eyelids so delicate the eyes beneath them almost showed glowing through; and if, indeed, it had been she who secreted all the grumbling grown-ups in their wardrobes and bathrooms and wound me through the house on an invisible spool towards her, well, I could scarcely begrudge her her fun. And her game had been as much with those grown-ups as it had been with me; hadn't she tidied them all away as if they'd been dolls she'd stowed in the huge toychest of this exquisite house?

When I thought of that, I went so far in forgiveness as to stroke her eggshell cheek with my finger. Her skin was soft as plumage of snow and sensitive as that of the princess in the story of the princess and the pea; when I touched her, she stirred. She shrugged away from my touch, muttering, and rolled over uneasily. As she did so, a gleaming bundle

slithered from between her covers on to the floor, banging its china head on the scrubbed linoleum.

She must have tiptoed down to collect her forgotten doll while I went prowling about the bedrooms. Here he was again, her Pierrot in his shining white pyjamas, her little friend. Perhaps her only friend. I bent to pick him up from the floor for her and, as I did so, something caught the light and glittered at the corner of his huge, tragic, glass eye. A sequin? A brilliant? The moon is your country, old chap; perhaps they've put stars in your eyes for you.

I looked more closely.

It was wet.

It was a tear.

Then I felt a succinct blow on the back of my neck, so sudden, so powerful, so unexpected that I felt only a vague astonishment as I pitched forward on my face into a black vanishment.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a troubled absence of light around me; when I tried to move, a dozen little daggers serrated me. It was terribly cold and I was lying on, yes, marble, as if I was already dead, and I was trapped inside a little hill of broken glass inside the wet carapace of Melissa's husband's sheepskin coat that was sodden with melting snow.

After a few, careful, agonising twitches, I thought it best to stay quite still in this dank, lightless hall where the snow drove in through an open door whose outline I could dimly see against the white night outside. Slow as a dream, the door shifted back and forth on rusty hinges with a raucous, mechanical, monotonous caw, like that of crows.

I tried to piece together what had happened to me. I guessed I lay on the floor of the hall of the house I could have sworn I'd just explored, though I could see very little of its interior in the ghostly light -- but all must once have been painted white, though now sadly and obscenely scribbled over by rude village boys with paint and chalks. The despoiled pallor reflected itself in a cracked mirror of immense size on the wall.

Perhaps I had been trapped by the fall of a chandelier. Certainly, I had been caught in the half-shattered glass viscera of the chandelier that I thought I'd just seen multiplying its reflections in another hall than the one in which I lay and every bone in my body ached and throbbed. If time had loosened the chandelier from its moorings in the flaking plaster above me,

the chandelier might very well have come tumbling down on me as I sheltered from the storm that howled and gibbered around the house but then it might have killed me and I knew by my throbbing bruises that I was still alive. But had I not just walked through this very hall when it was warm and perfumed and suave with money? Or had I not.

Then I was pierced by a beam of light that struck cold green fire from the prisms around me. The invisible behind the flashlight addressed me unceremoniously in a cracked, old woman's voice, a crone's voice. Who be you? What be you up to?

Trapped in the splintered glass, the splintered light, I told her how my car had broken down in the snow and I had come here for assistance. This alibi now seemed to me a very feeble one.

I could not see the old woman at all, could not even make out her vague shape behind the light, but I told her I was staying with the Lady Melissa, to impress her old country crone's snobbery. She exclaimed and muttered when she heard Melissa's name; when she spoke again, her manner was almost excessively conciliatory. She has to be careful, poor old woman, all alone in the house; thieves come for lead from the roof and young couples up to no good come and so on and on. But, if I am the Lady Melissa's guest, then she is sure it is perfectly all right for me to shelter here. No, there is no telephone. I must wait here till the storm dies down. The new snow will have blocked the lane by now -- we are quite cut off! she says; and titters.

I must follow her carefully, walk this way; she gives me a hand out of the mess, so much broken glass. . . take care. What a crash, when the chandelier came down! You'd have thought the world had come to an end. Come with her, she has her rooms; she is quite cosy, sir, with a roaring fire. (What weather, eh?)

She lit me solicitously out of the glass trap and took me past our phantoms moving like deep sea fish in the choked depths of the mirror; up the stairs we went, through the ruins of the house I thought I had explored in my waking faint or system of linked hallucinations, snow induced, or, perhaps, induced by a mild concussion. For I am shaky and a little nauseous; I grasp the banisters too tight.

The doors shudder on their hinges. I glimpse rooms with the furniture spookily shrouded in white sheets but the beam of her torch does not linger on anything; her carpet slippers go flipperty-flopperty, flipperty-

flopperty, she is an intrepid negotiator of the shadows. And still I cannot see her clearly, although I hear the rustle of her dress and smell her musty, frowsty, second-hand clothes store, typical crone smell, like grandma's smell, smell of my childhood women.

She has, of course, ensconced herself in the nursery. And how I gasped, in my mild fever, to see so many dolls had set up camp in this decay!

Dolls everywhere higgledy-piggledy, dolls thrust down the sides of chairs, dolls spilled out of tea chests, dolls propped up on the mantelpiece with blank, battered faces. Had she gathered all the dolls of all the departed daughters of the house here, around her, for company? The dolls stared at me dumbly from glass eyes that might hold in suspension the magic snow-storm that trapped me here; I felt I was the cynosure of all their blind eyes.

And have I indeed met any of these now moth-gnawed creatures in this room before? When I first fainted in the hall, did I fall back in time to encounter on a white beach of years ago this young lady, whose heavy head drops forward on her bosom since her limp body has lost too much sawdust to continue to support it? The struts of her satin crinoline, stove in like a broken umbrella. Her blousy neighbour's dark red silk dress has faded to a thin pink but she has not lost her parasol because it had been sewn to her hand and her straw bonnet with the draggled feathers still hangs by a few threads from the brunette wig now awry on a china scalp.

And I almost tripped over a poor corpse on the floor in a purplish jacket of balding velvet, her worn, wax face raddled with age, only a few strands left of all that honey-coloured hair. . .

Yet if any of the denizens of that imaginary nursery were visiting this one, slipped out of my dream through a warp of the imagination, then I couldn't recognise them, thank God, among the dolls half loved to death and now scattered about a room whose present owner had consecrated it to a geriatric cosiness. Nevertheless, I felt a certain sense of disquiet, not so much fear as foreboding; but I was too preoccupied with my physical discomfort, my horrid aches, pains and scratches, to pay much attention to a prickling of the nerves.

And in the old woman's room, all was as comforting as a glowing fire, a steaming kettle could make it, even if eldritchly illuminated by a candle stuck in its own grease on to the mantelpiece. The very homeliness

of the room went some way towards restoring my battered spirits and the crone made me very welcome, bustled me out of the sheepskin coat with almost as much solicitude as if she knew who it belonged to, set me down in an armchair. In its red plush death-throes, this armchair looked nothing like those bleached, remembered splendours; I told myself the snow had got into my eyes and brain. The old woman crouched down to take off my wet shoes for me; poured me thick, rich tea from her ever-ready pot; cut me a slice of dark gingerbread that she kept in an old biscuit tin with a picture of kittens on the lid. No spook or phantom could have had a hand in the making of that sagging, treacly, indigestible goody! I felt better, already; outside, the blizzard might rage but I was safe and warm, inside, even if in the company of an authentic crone.

For such she undeniably was, bent almost to a hoop with age, salt and pepper hair skewered up on top of her head with tortoiseshell pins, a face so eroded with wrinkles it was hard to tell whether she was smiling or not. She and her quarters had not seen soap and water for a long time and the lingering, sour, rank odour of uncaredforness faintly repelled me but the tea went down like blood. And don't you remember the slops and old clothes smell of grandma's kitchen? Colin Clout's come home again, with a vengeance.

She poured tea for herself and perched on top of the pile of old newspapers and discarded clothing that cushioned her own chair at the other side of the fire, to sip from her cup and chatter about the violence of the weather whilst I went on thawing myself out, eyeing -- nervously, I must admit -- the dolls propped on every flat surface, the roomful of bedizened raggle-taggles.

When she saw me looking at the dolls, she said: "I see you're admiring my beauties." Meanwhile, snow drove against the curtainless window-panes like furious birds and blasts echoed through the house. The old woman thrust her empty cup away in the grate, all at once moved as if by a sudden sense of purpose; I saw I must pay in kind for my kind reception, I must give her a piece of undivided attention. She scooped up an armful of dolls and began to introduce them to me one by one. Dotty. Quite dotty, poor old thing.

The Hon. Frances Brambell had one eye out and her bell-shaped, satin skirt had collapsed but she must have been a pretty acquisition to the toy cupboard in her day; time, however, has its revenges, the three

divorces, the voluntary exile in Morocco, the hashish, the gigolos, the slow erosion of her beauty. . . how it made the old woman chuckle! But how enchanting the girl had looked when she was presented, the ostrich feathers nodding above her curls! I looked from the old woman to the doll and back again; now the crone was animated, a thick track of spittle descended her chin. With an ironic laugh, she tossed the Hon. Frances Brambell to one side; the china head bounced off the wall and her limbs jerked a little before she lay still on the floor.

Seraphine, Duchess of Pyke, wore faded maroon silk and what had once been a feathered hat. She hailed, initially, from Paris and still possessed a certain style, even in her old age, although the Duchess had been by no means a model of propriety and, even if she carried off her acquired rank to the manner born, there is no more perfect a lady than one who is no better than she should be, suggested the old woman. In a paroxysm of wheezing laughter, she cast the Duchess and her pretensions on top of the Hon. Frances Brambell and told me now I must meet Lady Lucy, ah! she would be a marchioness when she inherited but had been infected with moth in her most sensitive parts and grown emaciated, in spite of her pretty velvet riding habit. She always wore purple, the colour of passion. The sins of the fathers, insinuated this gossipy harridan, a congenital affliction. . . the future held in store for the poor girl only clinics, sanatoria, a wheel-chair, dementia, premature death.

Each doll's murky history was unfolded to me; the old woman picked them up and dismissed them with such confident authority I soon realised she knew all the little girls whose names she'd given to the dolls intimately. She must have been the nanny here, I thought; and stayed on after the family all left the sinking ship, after her last charge, that little daughter who might, might she not? have looked just like my imaginary blonde heiress, ran off with a virile but uncouth chauffeur, or, perhaps, the black saxophonist in the dance band of an ocean liner. And the retainer inherited the desuetude. In the old days, she must have wiped their pretty noses for them, cut their bread and butter into piano keys for them. . . all the little girls must once have played in this very nursery, come for tea with the young mistress, gone out riding on ponies, grown up to come to dances in wonderful dresses, stayed over for house parties, golf by day, affairs of the heart by night. Had my Melissa, herself, danced here, perhaps, in her unimaginable adolescence?

I thought of all the beautiful women with round, bare shoulders discreet as pearls going in to dinner in dresses as brilliant as the hot-house flowers that surrounded them, handsomely set off by the dinner-jackets of their partners, though they would have been far more finely accessorised by me -- women who had once filled the whole house with that ineffable perfume of sex and luxury that drew me greedily to Melissa's bed. And time, now, frosting those lovely faces, the years falling on their head like snow.

The wind howled, the logs hissed in the grate. The crone began to yawn and so did I. I can easily curl up in this armchair beside the fire; I'm half asleep already -- please don't trouble yourself. But, no; I must have the bed, she said.

You shall sleep in the bed.

And, with that, cackled furiously, jolting me from my bitter-sweet reverie. Her rheumy eyes flashed; I was stricken with the ghastly notion she wanted to sacrifice me to some aged lust of hers as the price of my night's lodging but I said: "Oh, I can't possibly take your bed, please no!" But her only reply was to cackle again.

When she rose to her feet, she looked far taller than she had been, she towered over me. Now, mysteriously, she resumed her old authority; her word was law in the nursery. She grasped my wrist in a hold like lockjaw and dragged me, weakly protesting, to the door that I knew, with a shock of perfect recognition, led to the night nursery.

I was cruelly precipitated back into the heart of my dream.

Beyond the door, on the threshold of which I stumbled, all was as it had been before, as if the night nursery were the changeless, unvaryingly eye of the storm and its whiteness that of a place beyond the spectrum of colours. The same scent of washed hair, the dim tranquillity of the night light. The white-enamelled crib, with its dreaming occupant. The storm crooned a lullaby; the little heiress of the snow pavilion had eyelids like carved alabaster that hold the light in a luminous cup, but she was a flawed jewel, this one, a shattered replica, a drawing that has been scribbled over, and, for the first time in all that night, I felt a pure fear.

The old woman softly approached her charge, and plucked an object, some floppy, cloth thing, from between the covers, where it had lain in the child's pale arms. And this object she, cackling again with obscure glee, handed to me as ceremoniously as if it were a present from a

Christmas tree. I jumped when I touched Pierrot, as if there were an electric charge in his satin pyjamas.

He was still crying. Fascinated, fearful, I touched the shining teardrop pendant on his cheek and licked my finger. Salt. Another tear welled up from the glass eye to replace the one I had stolen, then another, and another. Until the eyelids quivered and closed. I had seen his face before, a face that had eaten too much bread and margarine in its time. A magic snow-storm blinded my eyes; I wept, too.

Tell Melissa the image factory is bankrupt, grandma.

Diffuse, ironic benediction of the night light. The sleeping child extended her warm, sticky hand to grasp mine; in a terror of consolation, I took her in my arms, in spite of her impetigo, her lice, her stench of wet sheets.

The Quilt Maker

One theory is, we make our destinies like blind men chucking paint at a wall; we never understand nor even see the marks we leave behind us. But not too much of the grandly accidental abstract expressionist about *my* life, I trust; oh, no. I always try to live on the best possible terms with my unconscious and let my right hand know what my left is doing and, fresh every morning, scrutinise my dreams. Abandon, therefore, or rather, deconstruct the blind-action painter metaphor; take it apart, formalise it, put it back together again, strive for something a touch more hard-edged, intentional, altogether less arty, for I do believe we all have the right to choose.

In patchwork, a neglected household art neglected, obviously, because my sex excelled in it -- well, there you are; that's the way it's been, isn't it? Not that I have anything against fine art, mind; nevertheless, it took a hundred years for fine artists to catch up with the kind of brilliant abstraction that any ordinary housewife used to be able to put together in only a year, five years, ten years, without making a song and dance about it.

However, in patchwork, an infinitely flexible yet harmonious overall design is kept in the head and worked out in whatever material happens to turn up in the ragbag: party frocks, sackcloth, pieces of wedding-dress, of shroud, of bandage, dress shirts etc. Things that have been worn out or torn, remnants, bits and pieces left over from making blouses. One may appliqué upon one's patchwork birds, fruit and flowers that have been clipped out of glazed chintz left over from covering armchairs or making curtains, and do all manner of things with this and that.

The final design is indeed modified by the availability of materials; but not, necessarily, much.

For the paper patterns from which she snipped out regular rectangles and hexagons of cloth, the thrifty housewife often used up old love letters.

With all patchwork, you must start in the middle and work outward, even on the kind they call "crazy patchwork", which is made by feather-stitching together arbitrary shapes scissored out at the maker's whim.

Patience is a great quality in the maker of patchwork.

The more I think about it, the more I like this metaphor. You can really make this image work for its living; it synthesises perfectly both the miscellany of experience and the use we make of it.

Born and bred as I was in the Protestant north working-class tradition, I am also pleased with the metaphor's overtones of thrift and hard work.

Patchwork. Good.

Somewhere along my thirtieth year to heaven -- a decade ago now I was in the Greyhound Bus Station in Houston, Texas, with a man I was then married to. He gave me an American coin of small denomination (he used to carry about all our money for us because he did not trust me with it). Individual compartments in a large vending machine in this bus station contained various cellophane-wrapped sandwiches, biscuits and candy bars. There was a compartment with two peaches in it, rough-cheeked Dixie Reds that looked like Victorian pincushions. One peach was big. The other peach was small. I conscientiously selected the smaller peach.

"Why did you do that?" asked the man to whom I was married.

"Somebody else might want the big peach," I said.

"What's that to you?" he said.

I date my moral deterioration from this point.

No; honestly. Don't you see, from this peach story, how I was brought up? It wasn't -- truly it wasn't -- that I didn't think I deserved the big peach. Far from it. What it was, was that all my basic training, all my internalised values, told me to leave the big peach there for somebody who wanted it more than I did.

Wanted it; desire, more imperious by far than need. I had the greatest respect for the desires of other people, although, at that time, my own desires remained a mystery to me. Age has not clarified them except on matters of the flesh, in which now I know very well what I want; and that's quite enough of that, thank you. If you're looking for true confessions of that type, take your business to another shop. Thank you.

The point of this story is, if the man who was then my husband hadn't told me I was a fool to take the little peach, then I would never have left him because, in truth, he was, in a manner of speaking, always the little peach to me.

Formerly, I had been a lavish peach thief, but I learned to take the small one because I had never been punished, as follows:

Canned fruit was a very big deal in my social class when I was a kid and during the Age of Austerity, food-rationing and so on. Sunday teatime; guests; a glass bowl of canned peach slices on the table. Everybody gossiping and milling about and, by the time my mother put the teapot on the table, I had surreptitiously contrived to put away a good third of those peaches, thieving them out of the glass bowl with my crooked forepaw the way a cat catches goldfish. I would have been shall we say, for the sake of symmetry -- ten years old; and chubby.

My mother caught me licking my sticky fingers and laughed and said I'd already had my share and wouldn't get any more, but when she filled the dishes up, I got just as much as anybody else.

I hope you understand, therefore, how, by the time two more decades had rolled away, it was perfectly natural for me to take the little peach; had I not always been loved enough to feel I had some to spare? What a dangerous state of mind I was in, then!

As any fool could have told him, my ex-husband is much happier with his new wife; as for me, there then ensued ten years of grab, grab, grab didn't there, to make up for lost time.

Until it is like crashing a soft barrier, this collision of my internal calendar, on which dates melt like fudge, with the tender inexorability of time of which I am not, quite, yet, the ruins (although my skin fits less well than it did, my gums recede apace, I crumple like chiffon in the thigh). Forty.

The significance, the real significance, of the age of forty is that you are, along the allotted span, nearer to death than to birth. Along the lifeline I am now past the halfway mark. But, indeed, are we not ever, in some sense, past that halfway mark, because we know when we were born but we do not know. . .

So, having knocked about the four corners of the world awhile, the ex-peach thief came back to London, to the familiar seclusion of privet hedges and soiled lace curtains in the windows of tall, narrow terraces. Those streets that always seem to be sleeping, the secrecy of perpetual Sunday afternoons; and in the long, brick-walled back gardens, where the little town foxes who subsist off mice and garbage bark at night, there will be the soft pounce, sometimes, of an owl. The city is a thin layer on top of a wilderness that pokes through the paving stones, here and there, in tufts of grass and ragwort. Wood doves with mucky pink bosoms croon in the old trees at the bottom of the garden; we double-bar the door against burglars, but that's nothing new.

Next-door's cherry is coming out again. It's April's quick-change act: one day, bare; the next dripping its curds of bloom.

One day, once, sometime after the incident with the little peach, when I had put two oceans and a continent between myself and my ex-husband, while I was earning a Sadie Thompsonesque living as a barmaid in the Orient, I found myself, on a free weekend, riding through a flowering grove on the other side of the world with a young man who said: "Me Butterfly, you Pinkerton." And, though I denied it hotly at the time, so it proved, except, when I went away, it was for good. I never returned with an American friend, grant me sufficient good taste.

A small, moist, green wind blew the petals of the scattering cherry blossom through the open windows of the stopping train. They brushed his forehead and caught on his eyelashes and shook off on to the slatted wooden seats; we might have been a wedding party, except that we were pelted, not with confetti, but with the imagery of the beauty, the fragility, the fleetingness of the human condition.

"The blossoms always fall," he said.

"Next year, they'll come again," I said comfortably; I was a stranger here, I was not attuned to the sensibility, I believed that life was for living not for regret.

"What's that to me?" he said.

You used to say you would never forget me. That made me feel like the cherry blossom, here today and gone tomorrow; it is not the kind of thing one says to a person with whom one proposes to spend the rest of one's life, after all. And, after all that, for three hundred and fifty-two in

each leap year, I never think of you, sometimes. I cast the image into the past, like a fishing line, and up it comes with a gold mask on the hook, a mask with real tears at the ends of its eyes, but tears which are no longer anybody's tears.

Time has drifted over your face.

The cherry tree in next-door's garden is forty feet high, tall as the house, and it has survived many years of neglect. In fact, it has not one but two tricks up its arboreal sleeve; each trick involves three sets of transformations and these it performs regularly as clockwork each year, the first in early, the second in late spring. Thus:

one day, in April, sticks; the day after, flowers; the third day, leaves. Then --

through May and early June, the cherries form and ripen until, one fine day, they are rosy and the birds come, the tree turns into a busy tower of birds admired by a tranced circle of cats below. (We are a neighbourhood rich in cats.) The day after, the tree bears nothing but cherry pits picked perfectly clean by quick, clever beaks, a stone tree.

The cherry is the principal monument of Letty's wild garden. How wonderfully unattended her garden grows all the soft months of the year, from April through September! Dandelions come before the swallow does and languorously blow away in drifts of fuzzy seed. Then up sprouts a long bolster of creeping buttercups. After that, bindweed distributes its white cornets everywhere, it climbs over everything in Letty's garden, it swarms up the concrete post that sustains the clothesline on which the lady who lives in the flat above Letty hangs her underclothes out to dry, by means of a pulley from her upstairs kitchen window. She never goes in to the garden. She and Letty have not been on speaking terms for twenty years.

I don't know why Letty and the lady upstairs fell out twenty years ago when the latter was younger than I, but Letty already an old woman. Now Letty is almost blind and almost deaf but, all the same, enjoys, I think, the changing colours of this disorder, the kaleidoscope of the seasons variegating the garden that neither she nor her late brother have touched since the war, perhaps for some now forgotten reason, perhaps for no reason.

Letty lives in the basement with her cat.

Correction. Used to live.

Oh, the salty realism with which the Middle Ages put skeletons on gravestones, with the motto: "As I am now, so ye will be!" The birds will come and peck us bare.

I heard a dreadful wailing coming through the wall in the middle of the night. It could have been either of them, Letty or the lady upstairs, pissed out of their minds, perhaps, letting it all hang out, shrieking and howling, alone, driven demented by the heavy anonymous London silence of the fox-haunted night. Put my ear nervously to the wall to seek the source of the sound. "Help!" said Letty in the basement. The cow that lives upstairs later claimed she never heard a cheep, tucked up under the eaves in dreamland sleep while I leaned on the doorbell for twenty minutes, seeking to rouse her. Letty went on calling "Help!" Then I telephoned the police, who came flashing lights, wailing sirens, and double-parked dramatically, leaping out of the car, leaving the doors swinging; emergency call.

But they were wonderful. Wonderful. (We're not black, any of us, of course.) First, they tried the basement door, but it was bolted on the inside as a precaution against burglars. Then they tried to force the front door, but it wouldn't budge, so they smashed the glass in the front door and unfastened the catch from the inside. But Letty for fear of burglars, had locked herself securely in her basement bedroom, and her voice floated up the stairs: "Help!"

So they battered her bedroom door open too, splintering the jamb, making a terrible mess. The cow upstairs, mind, sleeping sweetly throughout, or so she later claimed. Letty had fallen out of bed, bringing the bedclothes with her, knotting herself up in blankets, in a grey sheet, an old patchwork bedcover lightly streaked at one edge with dried shit, and she hadn't been able to pick herself up again, had lain in a helpless tangle on the floor calling for help until the coppers came and scooped her up and tucked her in and made all cosy. She wasn't surprised to see the police; hadn't she been calling: "Help"? Hadn't help come?

"How old are you, love," the coppers said. Deaf as she is, she heard the question, the geriatric's customary trigger. "Eighty," she said. Her age is the last thing left to be proud of. (See how, with age, one defines oneself by age, as one did in childhood.)

Think of a number. Ten. Double it. Twenty. Add ten again. Thirty. And again. Forty. Double that. Eighty. If you reverse this image, you obtain something like those Russian wooden dolls, in which big babushka contains a middling babushka who contains a small babushka who contains a tiny babushka and so on *ad infinitum.*

But I am further away from the child I was, the child who stole the peaches, than I am from Letty. For one thing, the peach thief was a plump brunette; I am a skinny redhead.

Henna. I have had red hair for twenty years. (When Letty had already passed through middle age.) I first dyed my hair red when I was twenty. I freshly henna'd my hair yesterday.

Henna is a dried herb sold in the form of a scum-green-coloured powder. You pour this powder into a bowl and add boiling water; you mix the powder into a paste using, say, the handle of a wooden spoon. (It is best not to let henna touch metal, or so they say.) This henna paste is no longer greyish, but now a dark vivid green, as if the hot water had revived the real colour of the living leaf, and it smells deliciously of spinach. You also add the juice of a half a lemon; this is supposed to "fix" the final colour. Then you rub this hot, stiff paste into the roots of your hair.

(However did they first think of it?)

You're supposed to wear rubber gloves for this part of the process, but I can never be bothered to do that, so, for the first few days after I have refreshed my henna, my fingertips are as if heavily nicotine-stained. Once the green mud has been thickly applied to the hair, you wrap it in an impermeable substance -- a polythene bag, or kitchen foil and leave it to cook. For one hour: auburn highlights. For three hours: a sort of vague russet halo around the head. Six hours: red as fire.

Mind you, henna from different *pays d'origines* has different effects -- Persian henna, Egyptian henna, Pakistani henna, all these produce different tones of red, from that brick red usually associated with the idea of henna to a dark, burning, courtesan plum or cockatoo scarlet. I am a connoisseur of henna, by now, "an unpretentious henna from the southern slope", that kind of thing. I've been every redhead in the book. But people think I am naturally redheaded and even make certain tempestuous allowances for me, as they did for Rita Hayworth, who purchased red hair at the same mythopoeic counter where Marilyn Monroe

acquired her fatal fairness. Perhaps I first started dyeing my hair in order to acquire the privileged irrationality of redheads. Some men say they adore redheads. These men usually have very interesting psycho-sexual problems and shouldn't be let out without their mothers.

When I combed Letty's hair next morning, to get her ready for the ambulance, I saw telltale scales of henna'd dandruff lying along her scalp, although her hair itself is now a vague salt and pepper colour and, I hazard, has not been washed since about the time I was making the peach decision in the Houston, Texas, bus station. At that time, I had appropriately fruity -- tangerine-coloured -- hair in, I recall, a crewcut as brutal as that of Joan of Arc at the stake such as we daren't risk now, oh, no. Now we need shadows, my vain face and I; I wear my hair down to my shoulders now. At the moment, henna produces a reddish-gold tinge on me. That is because I am going grey.

Because the effect of henna is also modified by the real colour of the hair beneath. This is what it does to white hair:

In Turkey, in a small country town with a line of poplar trees along the horizon and a dirt-floored square, chickens, motorbikes, apricot sellers, and donkeys, a woman was haggling for those sesame-seed-coated bracelets of bread you can wear on your arm. From the back, she was small and slender; she was wearing loose, dark-blue trousers in a peasant print and a scarf wound round her head, but from beneath this scarf there fell the most wonderful long, thick, Rapunzel-like plait of golden hair. Pure gold; gold as a wedding ring. This single plait fell almost to her feet and was as thick as my two arms held together. I waited impatiently to see the face of this fairy-tale creature.

Stringing her breads on her wrist, she turned; and she was old.

"What a life," said Letty, as I combed her hair.

Of Letty's life I know nothing. I know one or two things about her: how long she has lived in this basement -- since before I was born, how she used to live with an older brother, who looked after her, an *older* brother. That he, last November, fell off a bus, what they call a "platform accident", fell off the platform of a moving bus when it slowed for the stop

at the bottom of the road and, falling, irreparably cracked his head on a kerbstone.

Last November, just before the platform accident, her brother came knocking at our door to see if we could help him with a light that did not work. The light in their flat did not work because the cable had rotted away. The landlord promised to send an electrician but the electrician never came. Letty and her brother used to pay two pounds fifty pence a week rent. From the landlord's point of view, this was not an economic rent; it would not cover his expenses on the house, rates etc. From the point of view of Letty and her late brother, this was not an economic rent, either, because they could not afford it.

Correction: Letty and her brother could not afford it because he was too proud to allow the household to avail itself of the services of the caring professions, social workers and so on. After her brother died, the caring professions visited Letty *en masse* and now her financial position is easier, her rent is paid for her.

Correction: *was* paid for her.

We know her name is Letty because she was banging out blindly in the dark kitchen as we/he looked at the fuse box and her brother said fretfully: "Letty, give over!"

What Letty once saw and heard before the fallible senses betrayed her into a world of halftones and muted sounds is unknown to me. What she touched, what moved her, are mysteries to me. She is Atlantis to me. How she earned her living, why she and her brother came here first, all the real bricks and mortar of her life have collapsed into a rubble of forgotten past.

I cannot guess what were or are her desires.

She was softly fretful herself, she said: "They're not going to take me away, are they?" Well, they won't let her stay here on her own, will they, not now she has proved that she can't be trusted to lie still in her own bed without tumbling out arse over tip in a trap of blankets, incapable of righting herself. After I combed her hair, when I brought her some tea, she asked me to fetch her porcelain teeth from a saucer on the dressing table, so that she could eat the biscuit. "Sorry about that," she said. She asked me who the person standing beside me was; it was my own reflection in the

dressing-table mirror, but, all the same, oh, yes, she was in perfectly sound mind, if you stretch the definition of "sound" only a very little. One must make allowances. One will do so for oneself.

She needed to sit up to drink tea, I lifted her. She was so frail it was like picking up a wicker basket with nothing inside it; I braced myself for a burden and there was none, she was as light as if her bones were filled with air like the bones of birds. I felt she needed weights, to keep her from floating up to the ceiling following her airy voice. Faint odour of the lion house in the bedroom and it was freezing cold, although, outside, a good deal of April sunshine and the first white flakes of cherry blossom shaking loose from the tight buds.

Letty's cat came and sat on the end of the bed. "Hello, pussy," said Letty.

One of those ill-kempt balls of fluff old ladies keep, this cat looks as if he's unravelling, its black fur has rusted and faded at the same time, but some cats are naturals for the caring professions -- they will give you mute company long after anyone else has stopped tolerating your babbling, they don't judge, don't give a damn if you wet the bed and, when the eyesight fades, freely offer themselves for the consolation of still sentient fingertips. He kneads the shit-stained quilt with his paws and purrs.

The cow upstairs came down at last and denied all knowledge of last night's rumpus; she claimed she had slept so soundly she didn't hear the doorbell or the forced entry. She must have passed out or something, or else wasn't there at all but out on the town with her man friend. Or, her man friend was here with her *all the time* and she didn't want anybody to know so kept her head down. We see her man friend once or twice a week as he arrives crabwise to her door with the furtiveness of the adulterer. The cow upstairs is fiftyish, as well preserved as if she'd sprayed herself all over with the hair lacquer that keeps her bright brown curls in tight discipline.

No love lost between her and Letty. "What a health hazard! What a fire hazard!" Letty, downstairs, dreamily hallucinating in the icy basement as the cow upstairs watches me sweep up the broken glass on the hall floor. "She oughtn't to be left. She ought to be in a home." The final clincher: "For her *own good."*

Letty dreamily apostrophised the cat; they don't let cats into any old people's homes that I know of.

Then the social worker came; and the doctor; and, out of nowhere, a great-niece, probably summoned by the social worker, a great-niece in her late twenties with a great-great-niece clutching a teddy bear. Letty is pleased to see the great-great-niece, and this child is the first crack that appears in the picture that I'd built up of Letty's secluded, lonely old age. We hadn't realised there were kin; indeed, the great-niece puts us in our place good and proper. "It's up to family now," she said, so we curtsy and retreat, and this great-niece is sharp as a tack, busy as a bee, proprietorial yet tender with the old lady. "Letty, what have you got up to now?" Warding us outsiders off; perhaps she is ashamed of the shit-stained quilt, the plastic bucket of piss beside Letty's bed.

As they were packing Letty's things in an airline bag the great-niece brought, the landlord -- by a curious stroke of fate -- chose this very day to collect Letty's rent and perked up no end, stroking his well-shaven chin, to hear the cow upstairs go on and on about how Letty could no longer cope, how she endangered property and life on the premises by forcing men to come and break down doors.

What a life.

Then the ambulance came.

Letty is going to spend a few days in hospital.

This street is, as estate agents say, rapidly improving; the lace curtains are coming down, the round paper lampshades going up like white balloons in each front room. The landlord had promised the cow upstairs five thousand pounds in her hand to move out after Letty goes, so that he can renovate the house and sell it with vacant possession for a tremendous profit.

We live in hard-nosed times.

The still unravished bride, the cherry tree, takes flowering possession of the wild garden; the ex-peach thief contemplates the prospect of ripe fruit the birds will eat, not I. Curious euphemism "to go", meaning death, to depart on a journey.

Somewhere along another year to heaven, I elicited the following laborious explanation of male sexual response, which is the other side of

the moon, the absolute mystery, the one thing I can never know.

"You put it in, which isn't boring. Then you rock backwards and forwards. That can get quite boring. Then you come. That's not boring."

For "you", read "him".

"You come; or as we Japanese say, go."

Just so. *"Ikimasu,"* to go. The Japanese orgasmic departure renders the English orgasmic arrival, as if the event were reflected in the mirror and the significance of it altogether different -- whatever significance it may have, that is. Desire disappears in its fulfilment, which is cold comfort for hot blood and the reason why there is no such thing as a happy ending.

Besides all this, Japanese puts all its verbs at the ends of its sentences, which helps to confuse the foreigner all the more, so it seemed to me they themselves never quite knew what they were saying half the time.

"Everything here is arsy-varsy."

"No. Where you are is arsy-varsy."

And never the twain shall meet. He loved to be bored; don't think he was contemptuously dismissive of the element of boredom inherent in sexual activity. He adored and venerated boredom. He said that dogs, for example, were never bored, nor birds, so, obviously, the capacity that distinguished man from the other higher mammals, from the scaled and feathered things, was that of boredom. The more bored one was, the more one expressed one's humanity. He liked redheads. "Europeans are so colourful," he said. He was a tricky bugger, that one, a Big Peach, all right; face of Gerard Philipe, soul of Nechaev. I grabbed, grabbed and grabbed and, since I did not have much experience in grabbing, often bit off more than I could chew. Exemplary fate of the plump peach-thief; someone refuses to be assimilated. Once a year, when I look at Letty's cherry tree in flower, I put the image to work, I see the petals fall on a face that looked as if it had been hammered out of gold, like the mask of Agamemnon which Schliemann found at Troy.

The mask turns into a shining carp and flips off the hook at the end of the fishing line. The one that got away.

Let me not romanticise you too much. Because what would I do if you *did* resurrect yourself? Came knocking at my door in all your foul, cool, chic of designer jeans and leather blouson and your pocket stuffed

with G.N.P., arriving somewhat late in the day to make an honest woman of me as you sometimes used to threaten that you might? "When you're least expecting it. . ." God, I'm forty, now. Forty! I had you marked down for a Demon Lover; what if indeed you popped up out of the grave of the heart bright as a button with an American car purring outside waiting to whisk me away to where the lilies grow on the bottom of the sea? "I am now married to a house carpenter," as the girl in the song exclaimed hurriedly. But all the same, off she went with the lovely cloven-footed one. But I wouldn't. Not I.

And how very inappropriate too, the language of antique ballads in which to address one who knew best the international language of the jukebox. You'd have one of those Wurlitzer Cadillacs you liked, that you envied G.I.s for, all ready to humiliate me with; it would be bellowing out quadraphonic sound. The Everly Brothers. Jerry Lee Lewis. Early Presley. ("When I grow up," you reveried, "I'm going to Memphis to marry Presley.") You were altogether too much, you pure child of the late twentieth century, you person from the other side of the moon or mirror, and your hypothetical arrival is a catastrophe too terrifying to contemplate, even in the most plangent state of regret for one's youth.

I lead a quiet life in South London. I grind my coffee beans and drink my early cup to a spot of early baroque on the radio. I am now married to a house carpenter. Like the culture that created me, I am receding into the past at a rate of knots. Soon I'll need a whole row of footnotes if anybody under thirty-five is going to comprehend the least thing I say. And yet. . .

Going out into the back garden to pick rosemary to put inside a chicken, the daffodils in the uncut grass, enough blackbirds out to make a pie.

Letty's cat sits on Letty's windowsill. The blinds are drawn; the social worker drew them five days ago before she drove off in her little Fiat to the hospital, following Letty in the ambulance. I call to Letty's cat but he doesn't turn his head. His fluff has turned to spikes, he looks spiny as a horse-chestnut husk.

Letty is in hospital supping broth from a spouted cup and, for all my kind heart, of which I am so proud, my empathy and so on, I myself

had not given Letty's companion another thought until today, going out to pick rosemary with which to stuff a roast for our greedy dinners.

I called him again. At the third call, he turned his head. His eyes looked as if milk had been poured into them. The garden wall too high to climb since now I am less limber than I was, I chucked half the contents of a guilty tin of cat food over. Come and get it.

Letty's cat never moved, only stared at me with its curtained eyes. And then all the fat, sleek cats from every garden up and down came jumping, leaping, creeping to the unexpected feast and gobbled all down, every crumb, quick as a wink. What a lesson for a giver of charity! At the conclusion of this heartless banquet at which I'd been the thoughtless host, the company of well-cared-for beasts stretched their swollen bellies in the sun and licked themselves, and then, at last, Letty's cat heaved up on its shaky legs and launched itself, plop on to the grass.

I thought, perhaps he got a belated whiff of cat food and came for his share, too late, all gone. The other cats ignored him. He staggered when he landed but soon righted himself. He took no interest at all in the stains of cat food, though. He managed a few doddering steps among the dandelions. Then I thought he might be going to chew on a few stems of medicinal grass; but he did not so much lower his head towards it as let his head drop, as if he had no strength left to lift it. His sides were caved-in under stiff, voluminous fur. He had not been taking care of himself. He peered vaguely around, swaying.

You could almost have believed, not that he was waiting for the person who always fed him to come and feed him again as usual, but that he was pining for Letty herself.

Then his hind legs began to shudder involuntarily. He so convulsed himself with shuddering that his hind legs jerked off the ground; he danced. He jerked and shuddered, shuddered and jerked, until at last he vomited up a small amount of white liquid. Then he pulled himself to his feet again and lurched back to the windowsill. With a gigantic effort, he dragged himself up.

Later on, somebody jumped over the wall, more sprightly than I and left a bowl of bread and milk. But the cat ignored that too. Next day, both were still there, untouched.

The day after that, only the bowl of sour sops, and cherry blossom petals drifting across the vacant windowsill.

Small sins of omission remind one of the greater sins of omission; at least sins of commission have the excuse of choice, of intention. However:

May. A blowy, bright-blue, bright-green morning; I go out on the front steps with a shifting plastic sack of garbage and what do I see but the social worker's red Fiat putter to a halt next door.

In the hospital they'd henna'd Letty. An octogenarian redhead, my big babushka who contains my forty, my thirty, my twenty, my ten years within her fragile basket of bones, she has returned, not in a humiliating ambulance, but on her own two feet that she sets down more firmly than she did. She has put on a little weight. She has a better colour, not only in her hair but in her cheeks.

The landlord, foiled.

Escorted by the social worker, the district nurse, the home help, the abrasive yet not ungentle niece, Letty is escorted down the unswept, grass-grown basement stairs into her own scarcely used front door that someone with a key has remembered to unbolt from inside for her return. Her new cockatoo crest -- whoever henna'd her really understood henna -- points this way and that way as she makes sure that nothing in the street has changed, even if she can see only large blocks of light and shadow, hear, not the shrieking blackbirds, but only the twitch of the voices in her ear that shout: "Carefully does it, Letty."

"I can manage," she said tetchily.

The door the policemen battered in closes upon her and her chattering entourage.

The window of the front room of the cow upstairs slams down, bang.

And what am I to make of that? I'd set it up so carefully, an enigmatic structure about evanescence and ageing and the mists of time, shadows lengthening, cherry blossom, forgetting, neglect, regret. . . the sadness, the sadness of it all. . .

But. Letty. Letty came home.

In the corner shop, the cow upstairs, mad as fire: "They should have certified her"; the five grand the landlord promised her so that he could sell the house with vacant possession has blown away on the May

wind that disintegrated the dandelion clocks. In Letty's garden now is the time for fierce yellow buttercups; the cherry blossom is over, no regrets.

I hope she is too old and too far gone to miss the cat.

Fat chance.

I hope she never wonders if the nice warm couple next door thought of feeding him.

But she has come home to die at her own apparently ample leisure in the comfort and privacy of her basement; she has exercised, has she not, her right to choose, she has turned all this into crazy patchwork.

Somewhere along my thirtieth year, I left a husband in a bus station in Houston, Texas, a town to which I have never returned, over a quarrel about a peach which, at the time, seemed to sum up the whole question of the rights of individuals within relationships, and, indeed, perhaps it did.

As you can tell from the colourful scraps of oriental brocade and Turkish homespun I have sewn into this bedcover, I then (call me Ishmael) wandered about for a while and sowed (or sewed) a wild oat or two into this useful domestic article, this product of thrift and imagination, with which I hope to cover myself in my old age to keep my brittle bones warm. (How cold it is in Letty's basement.)

But, okay, so I always said the blossom would come back again, but Letty's return from the clean white grave of the geriatric ward is *ridiculous!* And, furthermore, when I went out into the garden to pick a few tulips, there he is, on the other side of the brick wall, lolling voluptuously among the creeping buttercups, fat as butter himself -- Letty's been feeding him up.

"I'm pleased to see *you,"* I said.

In a Japanese folk tale it would be the ghost of her cat, rusty and tactile as in life, the poor cat pining itself from death to life again to come to the back door at the sound of her voice. But we are in South London on a spring morning. Lorries fart and splutter along the Wandsworth Road. Capital Radio is braying from an upper window. An old cat, palpable as a second-hand fur coat, drowses among the buttercups.

We know when we were born but --

the times of our reprieves are equally random.

Shake it out and look at it again, the flowers, fruit and bright stain of henna, the Russian dolls, the wrinkling chiffon of the flesh, the old songs, the cat, the woman of eighty; the woman of forty, with dyed hair and most of her own teeth, who is *ma semblable, ma soeur*.Who now recedes into the deceptive privacy of a genre picture, a needlewoman, a quilt maker, a middle-aged woman sewing patchwork in a city garden, turning her face vigorously against the rocks and trees of the patient wilderness waiting round us.

Appendix

AFTERWORD TO *FIREWORKS*

I started to write short pieces when I was living in a room too small to write a novel in. So the size of my room modified what I did inside it and it was the same with the pieces themselves. The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative. I found that, though the play of surfaces never ceased to fascinate me, I was not so much exploring them as making abstractions from them, I was writing, therefore, tales.

Though it took me a long time to realise why I liked them, I'd always been fond of Poe, and Hoffman -- Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious -- mirrors; the externalised self; forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects. Formally the tale differs from the short story in that it makes few pretences at the imitation of life. The tale does not log everyday experience, as the short story does; it interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience, and therefore the tale cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge of everyday experience.

The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism. Character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural -- and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function -- that of provoking unease.

The tale has relations with subliterary forms of pornography, ballad and dream, and it has not been dealt with kindly by literati. And is it any wonder? Let us keep the unconscious in a suitcase, as Pere Ubu did with

his conscience, and flush it down the lavatory when it gets too troublesome.

So I worked on tales. I was living in Japan; I came back to England in 1972. I found myself in a new country. It was like waking up, it was a rude awakening. We live in Gothic times. Now, to understand and to interpret is the main thing; but my method of investigation is changing. These stories were written between 1970 and 1973 and are arranged in chronological order, as they were written. There is a small tribute to Defoe, father of the bourgeois novel in England, inserted in the story "Master".